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GOD'S GOOD MAN

MARIE CORELLI'S ROMANCES

A ROMANCE OF TWO WORLDS
VENDETTA
THELMA
ARDATH: THE STORY OF A DEAD SELF
THE SOUL OF LILITH
WORMWOOD: A DRAMA OF PARIS
BARABBAS: A DREAM OF THE WORLD'S TRAGEDY
THE SORROWS OF SATAN
THE MASTER-CHRISTIAN
"TEMPORAL POWER": A STUDY IN SUPREMACY

First Published September 1904

AUTHOR'S NOTE

FOR all sins, whether of omission or non-omission, of construction or non-construction, of conformity or non-conformity, of crudity or complexity, of diffuseness or dullness, of expression or of method, of inception or conception, of sequence or sequel, of singularity or individuality,—likewise for all errors whether technical and pertaining to the printer, or literary and pertaining to the author, and for everything imaginable or unimaginable that may be found commendable or uncommendable, pleasing or displeasing, aggravating, or satisfying in this humble love-story for which no man will be the wiser and no woman the worse.

GENTLE REVIEWER BE MERCIFUL UNTO ME!

AND,

From wilful misquotations,—from sentences garbled, and randomly set forth to the public without context, continuation or conclusion, in attempt to do injury to both the story and its writer,—from the novel-skimmer's epitome, abridgment, synopsis or running commentary,—and from the objective analysis of literary-clique 'stylists,' and other distinguished persons, who, by reason of their superior intellectuality to all the rest of the world, are always able, and more than ready to condemn a book without reading it,

MAY AN HONEST PRESS DELIVER ME!

TO

THE LIVING ORIGINAL

OF

"THE REVEREND JOHN WALDEN"

AND HIS WIFE

THIS SIMPLE LOVE STORY

IS

AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED

"THERE WAS A MAN SENT FROM GOD WHOSE NAME WAS JOHN"

NEW TESTAMENT

GOD'S GOOD MAN

A SIMPLE LOVE STORY

CHAPTER I

IT was May-time in England.

The last breath of a long winter had blown its final farewell across the hills,—the last frost had melted from the broad, low-lying fields, relaxing its iron grip from the clods of rich, red-brown earth which now, soft and broken, were sprouting thick with the young corn's tender green. It had been a hard, inclement season. Many a time, since February onward, had the too-eagerly pushing buds of trees and shrubs been nipped by cruel cold,—many a biting east wind had withered the first pale green leaves of the lilac and the hawthorn,—and the stormy caprices of a chill northern Spring had played havoc with all the dainty woodland blossoms that should, according to the ancient 'Shepherd's Calendar' have been flowering fully with the daffodils and primroses. But during the closing days of April a sudden grateful warmth had set in,—Nature, the divine goddess, seemed to awaken from long slumber and stretch out her arms with a happy smile,—and when May morning dawned on the world, it came as a vision of glory, robed in clear sunshine and girdled with bluest skies. Birds broke into enraptured song,—young almond and apple boughs quivered almost visibly every moment into pink and white bloom,—cowslips and bluebells raised their heads from mossy corners in the grass, and expressed

their innocent thoughts in sweetest odour—and in and through all things the glorious thrill, the mysterious joy of renewed life, hope and love pulsated from the Creator to His responsive creation.

It was May-time;—a real 'old-fashioned' English May, such as Spenser and Herrick sang of:

"When all is yclad
With blossoms; the ground with grass, the woodes
With greene leaves; the bushes with blossoming buddes,"

and when whatever promise our existence yet holds for us, seems far enough away to inspire ambition, yet close enough to encourage fair dreams of fulfilment. To experience this glamour and witchery of the flowering-time of the year, one must, perforce, be in the country. For in the towns, the breath of Spring is fœtid and feverish,—it arouses sick longings and weary regrets, but scarcely any positive ecstasy. The close, stuffy streets, the swarming people, the high buildings and stacks of chimneys which only permit the narrowest patches of sky to be visible, the incessant noise and movement, the self-absorbed crowding and crushing,—all these things are so many offences to Nature, and are as dead walls of obstacle set against the revivifying and strengthening forces with which she endows her freer children of the forest, field and mountain. Out on the wild heathery moorland, in the heart of the woods, in the deep bosky dells, where the pungent scent of moss and pine-boughs fills the air with invigorating influences, or by the quiet rivers, flowing peacefully under bending willows and past wide osier-beds, where the king-fisher swoops down with the sun-ray and the timid moor-hen paddles to and from her nest among the reeds,—in such haunts as these, the advent of a warm and brilliant May is fraught with that tremor of delight which gives birth to beauty, and concerning which that ancient and picturesque chronicler, Sir Thomas Malory, writes exultantly: "Like as May moneth flourisheth and flowerth in many gardens, so in likewise let every man of worship flourish his heart in this world!"

There was a certain 'man of worship' in the world at the particular time when this present record of life and love begins, who found himself very well-disposed to 'flourish his heart' in the Maloryan manner prescribed, when after many dark days of unseasonable cold and general atmospheric depression, May at last came in rejoicing. Seated under broad apple-boughs, which spread around him like a canopy studded with rosy bud-jewels that shone glossy bright against the rough dark-brown stems, he surveyed the smiling scenery of his own garden with an air of satisfaction that was almost boyish, though his years had run well past forty, and he was a parson to boot. A gravely sedate demeanour would have seemed the more fitting facial expression for his age and the generally accepted nature of his calling,—a kind of deprecatory toleration of the sunshine as part of the universal 'vanity' of mundane things,—or a condescending consciousness of the bursting apple-blossoms within his reach as a kind of inferior earthy circumstance which could neither be altered nor avoided.

The Reverend John Walden, however, was one of those rarely gifted individuals who cannot assume an aspect which is foreign to temperament. He was of a cheerful, even sanguine disposition, and his countenance faithfully reflected the ordinary bent of his humour. Seeing him at a distance, the casual observer would at once have judged him to be either an athlete or an ascetic. There was no superfluous flesh about him; he was tall and muscular, with well-knit limbs, broad shoulders, and a head altogether lacking in the humble or conciliatory 'droop' which all worldly-wise parsons cultivate for the benefit of their rich patrons. It was a distinctively proud head,—almost aggressive,—indicative of strong character and self-reliance, well-poised on a full throat, and set off by a considerable quantity of dark brown hair which was refractory in brushing, inclined to uncanonical curls, and plentifully dashed with grey. A broad forehead, deeply-set, dark-blue eyes, a straight and very prominent nose, a strong jaw and obstinate chin,—a firmly moulded mouth, round which many a sweet and tender thought had drawn kindly little lines of

gentle smiling that were scarcely hidden by the silver-brown moustache,—such, briefly, was the appearance of one, who though only a country clergyman, of whom the great world knew nothing, was the living representative of more powerful authority to his little 'cure of souls' than either the bishop of the diocese, or the King in all his majesty.

He was the sole owner of one of the smallest 'livings' in England,—an obscure, deeply-hidden, but perfectly unspoilt and beautiful relic of mediæval days, situated in one of the loveliest of woodland counties, and known as the village of St. Rest, sometimes called 'St. Est.' Until quite lately there had been considerable doubt as to the origin of this name, and the correct manner of its pronouncement. Some said it should be, 'St. East,' because, right across the purple moorland and beyond the line of blue hills where the sun rose, there stretched the sea, miles away and invisible, it is true, but nevertheless asserting its salty savour in every breath of wind that blew across the tufted pines. 'St. East,' therefore, said certain rural sages, was the real name of the village, because it faced the sea towards the east. Others, however, declared that the name was derived from the memory of some early Norman church on the banks of the peaceful river that wound its slow clear length in pellucid silver ribbons of light round and about the clover fields and high banks fringed with wild rose and snowy thorn, and that it should, therefore, be 'St. Rest,' or, better still, 'The Saint's Rest.' This latter theory had recently received strong confirmation by an unexpected witness to the past,—as will presently be duly seen and attested.

But St. Rest, or St. Est, whichever name rightly belonged to it, was in itself so insignificant as a 'benefice,' that its present rector, vicar, priest and patron had bought it for himself, through the good offices of a friend, in the days when such purchases were possible, and for some ten years had been supreme Dictator of his tiny kingdom and limited people. The church was his,—especially his, since he had restored it entirely at his own expense,——the rectory, a lop-sided, half-timbered house, built in the fifteenth century, was his,—the

garden, full of flowering shrubs, carelessly planted and allowed to flourish at their own wild will, was his,—the ten acres of pasture-land that spread in green luxuriance round and about his dwelling were his,—and, best of all, the orchard, containing some five acres planted with the choicest apples, cherries, plums and pears, and bearing against its long, high southern wall the finest peaches and nectarines in the county, was his also. He had, in fact, everything that the heart of a man, especially the heart of a clergyman, could desire, except a wife,—and that commodity had been offered to him from many quarters in various delicate and diplomatic ways,—only to be as delicately and diplomatically rejected.

And truly there seemed no need for any change in his condition. He had gone on so far in life,—'so far!' he would occasionally remind himself, with a little smile and sigh,—that a more or less solitary habit had, by long familiarity, become pleasant. Actual loneliness he had never experienced, because it was not in his nature to feel lonely. His well-balanced intellect had the brilliant quality of a finely-cut diamond, bearing many facets, and reflecting all the hues of life in light and colour; thus it quite naturally happened that most things, even ordinary and common things, interested him. He was a great lover of books, and, to a moderate extent, a collector of rare editions; he also had a passion for archæology, wherein he was sustained by a certain poetic insight of which he was himself unconscious. The ordinary archæologist is generally a mere Dry-as-Dust, who plays with the bones of the past as Shakespeare's Juliet fancied she might play with her forefathers' joints, and who eschews all use of the imaginative instinct as though it were some deadly evil. Whereas, it truly needs a very powerful imaginative lens to peer down into the recesses of bygone civilisations, and re-people the ruined haunts of dead men with their shadowy ghosts of learning, art, enterprise, or ambition.

To use the innermost eyes of his soul in such looking backward down the stream of Time, as well as in looking forward to that 'crystal sea' of the unknown Future, flowing round the

Great White Throne whence the river of life proceeds, was a favourite mental occupation with John Walden. He loved antiquarian research, and all such scientific problems as involve abstruse study and complex calculation,—but equally he loved the simplest flower and the most ordinary village tale of sorrow or mirth recounted to him by any one of his unlessoned parishioners. He gave himself such change of air and scene as he thought he required, by taking long swinging walks about the country, and found sufficient relaxation in gardening, a science in which he displayed considerable skill. No one in all the neighbourhood could match his roses, or offer anything to compare with the purple and white masses of violets which, quite early in January came out under his glass frames not only perfect in shape and colour, but full of the real 'English' violet fragrance, a benediction of sweetness which somehow seems to be entirely withheld from the French and Russian blooms. For the rest, he was physically sound and morally healthy, and lived, as it were, on the straight line from earth to heaven, beginning each day as if it were his first life-opportunity, and ending it soberly and with prayer, as though it were his last.

To such a mind and temperament as his, the influences of Nature, the sublime laws of the Universe, and the environment of existence, must needs move in circles of harmonious unity, making loveliness out of commonness, and poetry out of prose. The devotee of what is mistakenly called 'pleasure,'—enervated or satiated with the sickly moral exhalations of a corrupt society,—would be quite at a loss to understand what possible enjoyment could be obtained by sitting placidly under an apple-tree with a well-thumbed volume of the wisdom of the inspired pagan Slave, Epictetus, in the hand, and the eyes fixed, not on any printed page, but on a spray of warmly-blushing almond blossom, where a well-fed thrush, ruffling its softly speckled breast, was singing a wild strophe concerning its mate, which, could human skill have languaged its meaning, might have given ideas to a nation's laureate. Yet John Walden found unalloyed

happiness in this apparently vague and vacant way. There was an acute sense of joy for him in the repeated sweetness of the thrush's warbling,—the light breeze, stirring through a great bush of early flowering lilac near the edge of the lawn, sent out a wave of odour which tingled through his sensitive blood like wine,—the sunlight was warm and comforting, and altogether there seemed nothing wrong with the world, particularly as the morning's newspapers had not yet come in. With them would probably arrive the sad savour of human mischief and muddle, but till these daily morbid records made their appearance, May-day might be accepted as God made it and gave it,—a gift unalloyed, pure, bright and calm, with not a shadow on its lovely face of Spring. The Stoic spirit of Epictetus himself had even seemed to join in the general delight of nature, for Walden held the book half open at a page whereon these words were written:

"Had we understanding thereof, would any other thing better beseem us than to hymn the Divine Being and laud Him and rehearse His gracious deeds? These things it were fitting every man should sing, and to chant the greatest and divinest hymns for this, that He has given us the power to observe and consider His works, and a Way wherein to walk. If I were a nightingale, I would do after the manner of a nightingale; if a swan, after that of a swan. But now I am a reasoning creature, and it behoves me to sing the praise of God; this is my task, and this I do, nor as long as it is granted me, will I ever abandon this post. And you, too, I summon to join me in the same song."

"A wonderfully 'advanced' Christian way of looking at life, for a pagan slave of the time of Nero!" thought Walden, as his eyes wandered from the thrush on the almond tree, back to the volume in his hand,—"With all our teaching and preaching, we can hardly do better. I wonder——"

Here his mind became altogether distracted from classic lore, by the appearance of a very unclassic boy, clad in a suit of brown corduroys and wearing hob-nailed boots a couple of sizes too large for him, who, coming suddenly out from a box-

tree alley behind the gabled corner of the rectory, shuffled to the extreme verge of the lawn and stopped there, pulling his cap off, and treading on his own toes from left to right, and from right to left in a state of sheepish hesitancy.

"Come along,—come along! Don't stand there, Bob Keeley!" And Walden rose, placing Epictetus on the seat he vacated—"What is it?"

Bob Keeley set his hob-nailed feet on the velvety lawn with gingerly precaution, and advancing cap in hand, produced a letter, slightly grimed by his thumb and finger.

"From Sir Morton, please, sir! Hurgent, 'e sez."

Walden took the missive, small and neatly folded, and bearing the words 'Badsworth Hall' stamped in gold at the back of the envelope. Opening it, he read:

"Sir Morton Pippitt presents his compliments to the Reverend John Walden, and having a party of distinguished guests staying with him at the Hall, will be glad to know at what day and hour this week he can make a visit of inspection to the church with his friends."

A slight tinge of colour overspread Walden's face. Presently he smiled, and tearing up the note leisurely, put the fragments into one of his large loose coat pockets, for to scatter a shred of paper on his lawn or garden paths was an offence which neither he nor any of those he employed ever committed.

"How is your mother, Bob?" he then said, approaching the stumpy urchin, who stood respectfully watching him and awaiting his pleasure.

"Please, sir, she's all right, but she coughs orful!"

"Coughs orful, does she?" repeated the Reverend John, musingly; "Ah, that is bad!—I am sorry! We must—let me think!—yes, Bob, we must see what we can do for her—eh?"

"Yes, sir," replied Bob meekly, turning his cap round and round and wondering what 'Passon' was thinking about to have such a 'funny look' in his eyes.

"Yes!" repeated Walden, cheerfully, "We must see what we can do for her! My compliments to Sir Morton Pippitt, Bob, and say I will write."

"Nothink else, sir?"

"Nothing—or as you put it, Bob, 'nothink else'! I wish you would remember, my dear boy,"—and here he laid his firm, well-shaped hand protectingly on the small brown corduroy shoulder,—"that the word 'nothing' does not terminate in a 'k.' If you refer to your spelling-book, I am sure you will see that I am right. The Educational authorities would not approve of your pronunciation, Bob, and I am endeavouring to save you future trouble with the Government. By the way, did Sir Morton Pippitt give you anything for bringing his note to me?"

"Sed he would when I got back, sir."

"Said he would when you got back? Well,—I have my doubts, Bob,—I do not think he will. And the labourer being worthy of his hire, here is sixpence, which, if you like to do a sum on your slate, you will find is at the rate of one penny per mile. When you are a working man, you will understand the strict justice of my payment. It is three miles from Badsworth Hall and three back again,—and now I come to think of it, what were you doing up at Badsworth?"

Bob Keeley grinned from ear to ear.

"Me an' Kitty Spruce went up on spec with a Maypole early, sir!"

John Walden smiled. It was May morning,—of course it was!—and in the village of St. Rest the old traditional customs of May Day were still kept up, though in the county town of Riversford, only seven miles away, they were forgotten, or if remembered at all, were only used as an excuse for drinking and vulgar horse-play.

"You and Kitty Spruce went up on spec? Very enterprising of you both, I am sure! And did you make anything out of it?"

"No, sir,—there ain't no ladies there, 'cept Miss Tabitha,—onny some London gents,—and Sir Morton, 'e flew into an orful passion—like 'e do, sir,—an' told us to leave off singin' and git out,—'Git off my ground,' he 'ollers—'Git off!'—then jest as we was a gittin' off, he cools down suddint like, an' 'e

sez, sez 'e: 'Take a note to the dam passon for me, an' bring a harnser, an' I'll give yer somethink when yer gits back.' An' all the gents was a-sittin' at breakfast, with the winders wide open an' the smell of 'am an' eggs comin' through strong, an' they larfed fit to split theirselves, an' one on 'em tried to kiss Kitty Spruce, an' she spanked his face for 'im!"

The narration of this remarkable incident, spoken with breathless rapidity in a burst of confidence, seemed to cause the relief supposed to be obtained by a penitent in the confessional, and to lift a weight off Bob Keeley's mind. The smile deepened on the 'Passon's' face, and for a moment he had some difficulty to control an outbreak of laughter, but, recollecting the possibly demoralising effect it might have on the more youthful members of the community, if he, the spiritual director of the parish were reported to have laughed at the pugnacious conduct of the valiant Kitty Spruce, he controlled himself, and assumed a tolerantly serious air.

"That will do, Bob!—that will do! You must learn not to repeat all you hear, especially such objectionable words as may occasionally be used by a——a——a gentleman of Sir Morton Pippitt's high standing."

And here he squared his shoulders and looked severely down on the abashed Keeley. Anon he unbent himself somewhat and his eyes twinkled with kindly humour: "Why didn't you bring the Maypole here?" he enquired; "I suppose you thought it would not be as good a 'spec' as Badsworth Hall and the London gents—eh?"

Bob Keeley opened his round eyes very wide.

"We be all comin' 'ere, sir!" he burst out: "All on us—ever so many on us! But we reckoned to make a round of the village first and see how we took on, and finish up wi' you, sir! Kitty Spruce she be a-keepin' her best ribbin for comin' 'ere—we be all a-comin' 'fore twelve!"

Walden smiled.

"Good! I shall expect you! And mind you don't all sing out of tune when you do come. If you commit such an offence, I shall——let me see!—I shall make mincemeat of you!

—I shall indeed! Positive mincemeat!—and bottle you up in jars for Christmas!" And he nodded with the ferociously bland air of the giant in a fairy tale, whose particular humour is the devouring of small children. "Now you had better get back to Badsworth Hall with my message. Do you remember it? My compliments to Sir Morton Pippitt, and I will write."

He turned away, and Bob Keeley made as rapid a departure as was consistent with the deep respect he felt for the 'Passon,' having extracted a promise from the butcher boy of the village, who was a friend of his, that if he were 'quick about it,' he would get a drive up to Badsworth and back again in the butcher's cart going there for orders, instead of tramping it.

The Reverend John, meanwhile, strolled down one of the many winding garden paths, past clusters of daffodils, narcissi and primroses, into a favourite corner which he called the 'Wilderness,' because it was left by his orders in a more or less untrimmed, untrained condition of luxuriantly natural growth. Here the syringa, a name sometimes given by horticultural pedants to the lilac, for no reason at all except to create confusion in the innocent minds of amateur growers, was opening its white 'mock orange' blossoms, and a mass of flowering aconites spread out before him like a carpet of woven gold. Here, too, tufts of bluebells peeped forth from behind the moss-grown stems of several ancient oaks and elms, and purple pansies bordered the edge of the grass. A fine old wistaria grown in tree-form, formed a natural arch of entry to this shady retreat, and its flowers were just now in their full beauty, hanging in a magnificent profusion of pale mauve grapelike bunches from the leafless stems. Many roses, of the climbing or 'rambling' kind, were planted here, and John Walden's quick eye soon perceived where a long green shoot of one of those was loose and waving in the wind to its own possible detriment. He felt in his pockets for a bit of roffia or twine to tie up the straying stem,—he was very seldom without something of the kind for such emergencies, but this time he only groped among the fragments of Sir Morton Pippitt's note and found nothing useful. Stepping

out on the path again, he looked about him and caught a glimpse of a stooping, bulky form in weather-beaten garments, planting something in one of the borders at a little distance.

"Bainton!" he called.

The figure slowly raised itself, and as slowly turned its head.

"Sir!"

"Just come here and tie this rose up, will you?"

The individual addressed approached at a very deliberate pace, dragging out some entangled roffia from his pocket as he came and severing it into lengths with his teeth. Walden partly prepared his task for him by holding up the rose branch in the way it should go, and on his arrival assisted him in the business of securing it to the knotty bough from which it had fallen.

"That looks better!" he remarked approvingly, as he stepped back and surveyed it. "You might do this one at the same time while you are about it, Bainton."

And he pointed to a network of 'Crimson rambler' rose-stems which had blown loose from their moorings and were lying across the grass.

"This place wants a reg'ler clean out," remarked Bainton then, in accents of deep disdain, as he stooped to gather up the refractory branches: "It beats me altogether, Passon, to know what you wants wi' a forcin' bed for weeds an' stuff in the middle of a decent garden. That old Wistaria Sin-yens (Sinensis) is the only thing here that is worth keeping. Ah! Y'are a precious sight, y'are!" he continued, apostrophising the 'rambler' branches—"For all yer green buds ye ain't a-goin' to do much this year! All sham an' 'umbug, y'are! —all leaf an' shoot an' no flower,—like a great many people I knows on—ah!—an' not so far from this village neither! I'd clear it all out if I was you, Passon,—I would reely now!"

Walden laughed.

"Don't open the old argument, Bainton!" he said good-humouredly; "We have talked of this before. I like a bit of wild Nature sometimes."

"Wild natur!" echoed Bainton. "Seems to me natur

allus wants a bit of a wash an' brush up 'fore she sits down to her master's table;—an' who's 'er master? Man! She's jest like a child comin' out of a play in the woods, an' 'er 'air's all blown, an' 'er nails is all dirty. That's natur! Trim 'er up an' curl 'er 'air an' she's worth looking at. Natur! Lor', Passon, if ye likes wild natur ye ain't got no call to keep a gard'ner. But if ye pays me an' keeps me, ye must 'spect me to do my duty. Wherefore I sez: why not 'ave this 'ere musty-fusty place, a reg'ler breedin' 'ole for hinsects, wopses, 'ornits, snails an' green caterpillars—ah! an' I shouldn't wonder if potato-fly got amongst 'em, too!—why not, I say, have it cleaned out?"

"I like it as it is," responded Walden with cheerful imperturbability, and a smile at the thick-set obstinate-looking figure of his 'head man about the place' as Bainton loved to be called. "Have you planted out my phloxes?"

"Planted 'em out every one," was the reply; "Likewhich the Delphy Inums. An' I've put enough sweet peas in to supply Covint Garden market, bearin' in mind as 'ow you sed you couldn't have enough on 'em. Sir Morton Pippitt's Lunnon valet come along the day I was a-doin' of it, an' 'e peeps over the 'edge an' 'e sez, sez 'e: 'Weedin' corn, are yer?' 'No, ye gowk,' sez I! 'Ever seen corn at all 'cept in a bin? Mixed wi' thistles, mebbe?' An' then he used a bit of 'is master's or'nary language, which as ye knows, Passon, is chice—partikler chice. 'Evil communications c'rupts good manners' even in a valet wot 'as no more to do than wash an' comb a man like a 'oss, an' pocket fifty pun a year for keepin' of 'is haristocratic master clean. Lor'!—what a wurrld it is!—what a wurrld!"

He had by this time tied up the 'Crimson rambler' in orderly fashion, and the Reverend John, stroking his moustache to hide a smile, proceeded to issue various orders according to his usual daily custom.

"Don't forget to plant some mignonette in the west border, Bainton. Not the giant kind,—the odour of the large blooms is rough and coarse compared with that of the

smaller variety. Put plenty of the 'common stuff' in,—such mignonette as our grandmothers grew in their gardens, before you Latin-loving horticultural wise-acres began to try for size rather than sweetness."

Bainton drew himself up with a quaint assumption of dignity, and by lifting his head a little more, showed his countenance fully,—a countenance which, though weather-worn and deeply furrowed, was a distinctly intelligent one, shrewd and thoughtful, with sundry little curves of humour lighting up its native expression of saturnine sedateness.

"I suppose y'are alludin' to the F.R.H.'s, Passon," he said; "They all loves Latin, as cats loves milk; howsomever, they never knows 'ow to pronounce it. Likewhich myself not bein' a F.R.H. nor likely to be, I'm bound to confess I dabbles in it a bit,—though there's a chap wot I gets cheap shrubs of, his Latin's worse nor mine, an' 'e's got all the three letters after 'is name. 'Ow did 'e get 'em? By reason of competition in the Chrysanthum Show. Lor'! Henny fool can grow ye a chrysanthum as big as a cabbage, if that's yer fancy,—that ain't scientific gard'nin'! An' as for the mignonette, I reckon to agree wi' ye, Passon—the size ain't the sweetness, likewhich when I married, I married a small lass, for sez I: 'Little to carry, less to keep!' An' that's true enough, though she's gained in breadth, Lor' love 'er!—wot she never 'ad in heighth. As I was a-sayin', the chap wot I gets shrubs of, reels off 'is Latin like chollops of mud off a garden scraper; but 'e don't understand it while 'e sez it. Jes' for show, bless ye! It all goes down wi' Sir Morton Pippitt, though, for 'e sez, sez 'e: '*My* cabbages are the prize vegetable, grown by Mr. Smogorton of Worcester, F.R.H.' 'E's got it in 'is Catlog! Hor!-hor!-hor! Passon, a bit o' Latin do go down wi' some folk in the gard'nin' line—it do reely now!"

"Talking of Sir Morton Pippitt," said Walden, disregarding his gardener's garrulity, "It seems he has visitors up at the Hall."

"'E 'as so," returned Bainton; "Reg'ler weedy waifs an' strays o' 'umanity, if one may go by out'ard appearance; not a

single firm, well-put-down leg among 'em. Mos'ly 'lords' and 'sirs.' Bein' so jes' lately knighted for buildin' a 'ospital at Riversford, out of the proceeds o' bone meltin' into buttons, Sir Morton couldn't a' course be expected to put up wi' a plain 'mister' takin' food wi' 'im."

"Well, well,—whoever they are, they want to see the church."

"Seems to me a sight o' folks wants to see the church since ye spent so much money on it, Passon," said Bainton somewhat resentfully; "There oughter be a charge made for entry."

Walden smiled thoughtfully; but there was a small line of vexation on his brow.

"They want to see the church," he repeated, "Or rather Sir Morton wants them to 'inspect' the church;"—and then his smile expanded and became a soft mellow laugh; "What a pompous old fellow it is! One would almost think he had restored the church himself, and not only restored it, but built it altogether and endowed it!" He turned to go, then suddenly bethought himself of other gardening matters,—"Bainton, that bare corner near the house must be filled with clematis. The plants are just ready to bed out. And look to the geraniums in the front border. By the way, do you see that straight line along the wall there,—where I am pointing?"

"Yes, sir!" dutifully rejoined Bainton, shading his eyes from the strong sun with one grimy hand.

"Well, plant nothing but hollyhocks there,—as many as you can cram in. We must have a blaze of colour to contrast with those dark yews. See to the jessamine and passion-flowers by the porch; and there is a 'Gloire' rose near the drawing-room window that wants cutting back a bit." He moved a step or two, then again turned: "I shall want you later on in the orchard,—the grass there needs attending to."

A slow grin pervaded Bainton's countenance.

"Ye minds me of the 'Oly Scripter, Passon, ye does reely now!" he said—"Wi' all yer different orders an'

idees, y'are behavin' to me like the very moral o' the livin' Wurrd!"

Walden looked amused.

"How do you make that out?"

"Easy enough, sir,—'The Scripter moveth us in sun'ry places'! Hor!-hor!-hor!—" and Bainton burst into a hoarse chuckle of mirth, entirely delighted with his own witticism, and walked off, not waiting to see whether its effect on his master was one of offence or appreciation. He was pretty sure of his ground, however, for he left John Walden laughing, a laugh that irradiated his face with some of the sunshine stored up in his mind. And the sparkle of mirth still lingered in his eyes as, crossing the lawn and passing the seat where the volume of Epictetus lay, now gratuitously decorated by a couple of pale pink shell-like petals dropped from the apple-blossoms above it, he entered his house, and proceeding to his study sat down and wrote the following brief epistle:

"The Reverend John Walden presents his compliments to Sir Morton Pippitt, and in reply to his note begs to say that, as the church is always open and free, Sir Morton and his friends can 'inspect' it at any time provided no service is in progress."

Putting this in an envelope, he sealed and stamped it. It should go by post, and Sir Morton would receive it next morning. There was no need for a 'special messenger,' either in the person of Bob Keeley, or in the authorised Puck of the Post Office Messenger-service.

"For there is not the slightest hurry," he said to himself: "It will not hurt Sir Morton to be kept waiting. On the contrary, it will do him good. He had it all his own way in this parish before I came,—but now for the past ten years he has known what it is to 'kick against the pricks' of legitimate Church authority. Legitimate Church authority is a fine thing! Half the Churchmen in the world don't use it, and a goodly portion of the other half misuse it. But when you've got a bumptious, purse-proud, self-satisfied old county snob like Sir Morton Pippitt to deal with, the pressure of the

iron hand should be distinctly exercised under the velvet glove!"

He laughed heartily, throwing back his head with a sense of enjoyment in his laughter. Then, rising from his desk, he turned towards the wide latticed doors of his study, which opened into the garden, and looked out dreamily, as though looking across the world and far beyond it. The sweet mixed warbling of birds, the thousand indistinguishable odours of flowers, made the air both fragrant and musical. The glorious sunshine, the clear blue sky, the rustling of the young leaves, the whispering swish of the warm wind through the shrubberies,—all these influences entered the mind and soul of the man and aroused a keen joy which almost touched the verge of sadness. Life pulsated about him in such waves of creative passion, that his own heart throbbed uneasily with Nature's warm restlessness; and the unanswerable query which, in spite of his high and spiritual faith had often troubled him, came back again hauntingly to his mind,—"Why should Life be made so beautiful only to end in Death?"

This was the Shadow that hung over all things; this was the one darkness he and others of his calling were commissioned to transfuse into light,—this was the one dismal end for all poor human creatures which he, as a minister of the Gospel was bound to try and represent as not an End but a Beginning,—and his soul was moved to profound love and pity as he raised his eyes to the serene heavens and asked himself: "What compensation can all the most eloquent teaching and preaching make to men for the loss of the mere sunshine? Can the vision of a world beyond the grave satisfy the heart so much as this one perfect morning of May!"

An involuntary sigh escaped him. The beating wings of a swallow flying from its nest under the old gabled eaves above him flashed a reflex of quivering light against his eyes; and away in the wide meadow beyond, where the happy cattle wandered up to their fetlocks in cowslips and lush grass, the cuckoo called with cheerful persistence. One of old Chaucer's

quaintly worded legends came to his mind,—telling how the courtly knight Arcite,

"Is risen, and looketh on the merrie daye
All for to do his òbservance to Maye,—
And to the grove of which that I you told,
By àventure his way he gan to hold
To maken him a garland of the greves,
Were it of woodbind or of hawthorn leaves,
And loud he sung against the sunny sheen,—
'O Maye with all thy flowers and thy green,
Right welcome be thou, fairé, freshé Maye!
I hope that I some green here getten may!'"

Smiling at the antique simplicity and freshness of the lines as they rang across his brain like the musical jingle of an old-world spinet, his ears suddenly caught the sound of young voices singing at a distance.

"Here come the children!" he said; and stepping out from his open window into the garden, he again bent his ear to listen. The tremulous voices came nearer and nearer, and words could now be distinguished, breaking through the primitive quavering melody of 'The Mayers' Song' known to all the country side since the thirteenth century:

"Remember us poor Mayers all.—
And thus do we begin,
To lead our lives in righteousness,
Or else we die in sin.

We have been rambling all this night,
And almost all this day;
And now returning back again,
We bring you in the May.

The hedges and trees they are so green,
In the sunne's goodly heat,
Our Heavenly Father He watered them
With His Heavenly dew so sweet.

A branch of May we have brought you——"

Here came a pause and the chorus dropped into an uncertain murmur. John Walden heard his garden gates swing back on their hinges, and a shuffling crunch of numerous small feet on the gravel path.

"G'arn, Susie!" cried a shrill boy's voice—"If y'are leadin' us, lead! G'arn!"

A sweet flute-like treble responded to this emphatic adjuration, singing alone, clear and high,

"A branch of May——"

and then all the other voices chimed in:

"A branch of May we have brought you
And at your door it stands,
'Tis but a sprout,
But 'tis budded out
By the work of our Lord's hands!"

And with this, a great crown of crimson and white blossoms, set on a tall, gaily-painted pole and adorned with bright coloured ribbons, came nid-nodding down the box-tree alley to the middle of the lawn opposite Walden's study window, where it was quickly straightened up and held in position by the eager hands of some twenty or thirty children, of all sizes and ages, who, surrounding it at its base, turned their faces, full of shy exultation towards their pastor, still singing, but in more careful time and tune:

"The Heavenly gates are open wide,
Our paths are beaten plain,
And if a man be not too far gone,
He may return again.

The moon shines bright and the stars give light
A little before it is day,
So God bless you all, both great and small,
And send you a merrie May!"

CHAPTER II

FOR a moment or two Walden found himself smitten by so strong a sense of the mere simple sensuous joy of living, that he could do no more than stand looking in silent admiration at the pretty group of expectant young creatures gathered round the Maypole, and huddled, as it were, under its cumbrous crown of dewy blossoms, which showed vividly against the clear sky, while the long streamers of red, white and blue depending from its summit, trailed on the daisy-sprinkled grass at their feet.

Every little face was familiar and dear to him. That awkward lad, grinning from ear to ear, with a particularly fine sprig of flowering hawthorn in his cap, was Dick Styles;—certainly a very different individual from Chaucer's knight, Arcite, but resembling him in so far that he had evidently gone into the woods early, moved by the same desire: 'I hope that I some green here getten may!' That tiny girl, well to the front, with a clean white frock on and no hat to cover her tangle of golden curls, was Baby Hippolyta,—the last, the very last, of the seemingly endless sprouting olive branches of the sexton, Adam Frost. Why the poor child had been doomed to carry the name of Hippolyta, no one ever knew. When he, Walden, had christened her, he almost doubted whether he had heard the lengthy appellation aright, and ventured to ask the godmother of the occasion to repeat it in a louder voice. Whereupon 'Hip—po—ly—ta' was uttered in such strong tones, so thoroughly well enunciated, that he could no longer mistake it, and the helpless infant,

screaming lustily, left the simple English baptismal font burdened with a purely Greek designation. She was, however, always called 'Ipsie' by her playmates, and even her mother and father, who were entirely responsible for her name in the first instance, found it somewhat weighty for daily utterance and gladly adopted the simpler sobriquet, though the elders of the village generally were rather fond of calling her with much solemn unction: 'Baby Hippolyta,' as though it were an elaborate joke. Ipsie was one of the loveliest children in the village, and though she was only two-and-a-half years old, she was fully aware of her own charms. She was pushed to the front of the Maypole this morning, merely because she was pretty,—and she knew it. That was why she lifted the extreme edge of her short skirt and put it in her mouth, thereby displaying her fat innocent bare legs extensively, and smiled at the Reverend John Walden out of the uplifted corners of her forget-me-not blue eyes. Then there was Bob Keeley, more or less breathless with excitement, having just got back again from Badsworth Hall, his friend the butcher boy having driven him to and from that place 'in a jiffy' as he afterwards described it,—and there was a very sparkling, smiling, vivacious little person of about fifteen, in a lilac cotton frock, who wore a wreath of laburnum on her black curls, no other than Kitty Spruce, generally alluded to in the village as 'Bob Keeley's gel';—and standing near Baby Hippolyta, or 'Ipsie,' was the acknowledged young beauty of the place, Susie Prescott, a slip of a lass with a fair Madonna-like face, long chestnut curls and great, dark, soft eyes like pansies filled with dew. Susie had a decided talent for music,—she sang very prettily, and led the village choir, under the guidance of Miss Janet Eden, the schoolmistress. This morning, however, she was risking the duties of conductorship on her own account, and very sweet she looked in her cheap white nunsveiling gown, wearing a bunch of narcissi carelessly set in her hair and carrying a flowering hazel-wand in her hand, with which she beat time for her companions as they followed her bird-like carolling in the 'Mayers' Song.' But just now all singing

had ceased,—and every one of the children had their round eyes fixed on John Walden with a mingling of timidity, affection and awe that was very winning and pretty to behold.

Taking in the whole picture of nature, youth and beauty, as it was set against the pure background of the sky, Walden realised that he was expected to say something,—in fact, he had been called upon to say something every year at this time, but he had never been able to conquer the singular nervousness which always overcame him on such occasions. It is one thing to preach from a pulpit to an assembled congregation who are prepared for orthodoxy and who are ready to listen with more or less patience to the expounding of the same,—but it is quite another to speak to a number of girls and boys all full of mirth and mischief, and as ready for a frolic as a herd of young colts in a meadow. Especially when it happens that most of the girls are pretty, and when, as a clergyman and director of souls, one is conscious that the boys are more or less all in love with the girls,—that one is a bachelor,—getting on in years too;—and that—chiefest of all—it is May-morning! One may perhaps be conscious of a contraction at the heart,—a tightening of the throat,—even a slight mist before the eyes may tease and perplex such an one—who knows? A flash of lost youth may sting the memory,—a boyish craving for love and sympathy may stir the blood, and may make the gravest parson's speech incoherent,—for after all, even a minister of the Divine is but a man.

At any rate the Reverend John found it difficult to begin. The round forget-me-not eyes of Baby Hippolyta stared into his face with relentless persistency,—the velvet pansy-coloured ones of Susie Prescott smiled confidingly up at him with a bewildering youthfulness and unconsciousness of charm; and the mischief-loving small boys and village yokels who stood grouped against the Maypole like rough fairy foresters guarding magic timber, were, with all the rest of the children, hushed into a breathless expectancy, waiting eagerly for 'Passon' to speak. And 'Passon' thereupon began,—in the lamest, feeblest, most paternally orthodox manner:

"My dear children–

"Hooray! Hooray! Three cheers for 'Passon'! Hooray!"

Wild whooping followed, and the Maypole rocked uneasily, and began to slant downward in a drunken fashion, like a convivial giant whom strong wine has made doubtful of his footing.

"Take care, you young rascals!" cried Walden, letting sentiment, orthodoxy and eloquence go to the winds,—"You will have the whole thing down!"

Peals of gay laughter responded, and the nodding mass of bloom was swiftly pulled up and assisted to support its necessary vertical dignity. But here Baby Hippolyta suddenly created a diversion. Moved perhaps by the consciousness of her own beauty, or by the general excitement around her, she suddenly waved a miniature branch of hawthorn and emitted a piercing yell.

"Passon! Tum 'ere! Passon! Tum 'ere!"

There was no possibility of 'holding forth' after this. A short address on the brevity of life, as being co-equal with the evanescent joys of a Maypole, would hardly serve,—and a fatherly admonition as to the unbecoming attitude of mendicancy assumed by independent young villagers carrying a great crown of flowers round to every house in the neighbourhood, and demanding pence for the show, would scarcely be popular. Because what did the 'Mayers' Song' say:

"The Heavenly gates are open wide,
Our paths are beaten plain;
And if a man be not too far gone,
He may return again."

And the 'Heavenly gates' of Spring being wide open, the Reverend John thought his special path was 'beaten plain' for the occasion; and not being 'too far gone' either in bigotry or lack of heart, John did what he reverently imagined the Divine Master might have done when He 'took a little child and set it in the midst.' He obeyed Baby Hippolyta's imperious command, and to her again loudly reiterated "Passon! Tum 'ere!" he sprang forward and caught her up

in his arms, kissing her rosy cheeks heartily as he did so. Seated in 'high exalted state' upon his shoulder, 'Ipsie' became Hippolyta in good earnest, so thoroughly aware was she of her dignity, while, holding her as lightly and buoyantly as he would have held a bird, the Reverend John turned his smiling face on his young parishioners.

"Come along, boys and girls!" he exclaimed,—"Come and plant the Maypole in the big meadow yonder, as you did last year! It is a holiday for us all to-day,—for me as well as for you! It has always been a holiday even before the days when great Elizabeth was Queen of England, and though many dear old customs have fallen into disuse with the changing world, St. Rest has never yet been robbed of its May-day festival! Be thankful for that, children!—and come along;—but move carefully!—keep order,—and sing as you come!"

Whereupon Susie Prescott lifted up her pretty voice again and her hazel-wand bâton at the same moment, and started the chorus with the verse:

"We have been rambling all this night,
And almost all this day;
And now returning back again,
We bring you in the May!"

And thus carolling, they passed through the garden moving meadow-wards, Walden at the head of the procession,—and Baby Hippolyta seated on his shoulder, was so elated with the gladsome sights and sounds, that she clasped her chubby arms round 'Passon's' neck and kissed him with a fervour that was as fresh and delightful as it was irresistibly comic.

Bainton, making his way along the southern wall of the orchard, to take a 'glance round' as he termed it, at the condition of the wall fruit-trees before his master joined him on the usual morning tour of inspection, stopped and drew aside to watch the merry procession winding along under the brown stems dotted with thousands of red buds splitting into pink-and-white bloom; and a slow smile moved the furrows of his face upward in various pleasant lines as he saw the 'Passon' leading it with

a light step, carrying the laughing 'Ipsie' on his shoulder, and now and again joining in the 'Mayers' Song' with a mellow baritone voice that warmed and sustained the whole chorus.

"There 'e goes!" he said half aloud—"Jes' like a boy!—for all the wurrld like a boy! I reckon 'e's got the secret o' never growin' old, for all that 'is 'air's turnin' a bit grey. 'Ow many passons in this 'ere neighbrood would carry the children like that, I wonder? Not one on 'em!—though there's a many to pick an' choose from—a darned sight too many if you axes my opinion! Old Putty Leveson, wi's bobbin' an' 'is bowin's to the east—hor!—hor!—hor!—a fine east 'e's got in 'is mouldy preachin' barn, wi' a whitewashed wall an' a dirty bit o' tinsel fixed up agin it—he wouldn't touch a child o' ourn, to save 'is life—though 'e's got three or four mean, lyin' pryin' brats of 'is own runnin' wild about the place as might jest as well 'ave never been born. And as for Francis Anthony, the 'igh pontiff o' Riversford, wi's big altar-cloak embrided for 'im by all the poor skinny spinsters wot ain't never 'ad no chance to marry—'e'd see all the children blowed to bits under the walls of Jericho to the sound o' the trumpets afore 'e'd touch 'em! Talk o' saints!—I'm not very good at unnerstannin' that kind o' folk, not seein' myself 'owever a saint could manage to get on in this mortal wurrld; but I reckon to think there's a tollable imitation o' the real article in Passon Walden—the jolly sort o' saint, o' coorse,—not the prayin', whinin', snuffin' kind. 'E's been doin' nothin' but good ever since 'e came 'ere, which m'appen partly from 'is not bein' married. If 'e'd gotten a wife, the place would a' been awsome different. Not but wot 'e ain't a bit cranky over 'is flowers 'isself. But I'd rather 'ave 'im fussin' round than a petticut arter me. A petticut at 'ome's enough, an' I ain't complainin' on it, though it's a bit breezy sometimes,—but a petticut in the gard'nin' line would drive me main wild—it would reely now!"

And still smiling with perfect complacency, he watched the Maypole being carried carefully along the space of grass left open between the fruit trees on either side of the orchard, and

followed its bright patch of colour and the children's faces and forms around it, till it entirely disappeared among the thicker green of a clump of elms that bordered the 'big meadow,' which Walden generally kept clear of both crops and cattle for the benefit of the village sports and pastimes.

He was indeed the only land-owner in the district who gave any consideration of this kind to the needs of the people. St. Rest was surrounded on all sides by several large private properties, richly wooded, and possessing many acres of ploughed and pasture land, but there was no public right-of-way across any single one of them, and every field, every woodland path, every tempting dell was rigidly fenced and guarded from 'vulgar' intrusion. None of the proprietors of these estates, however, appeared to take the least personal joy or pride in their possessions. They were for the most part away in London for 'the season' or abroad 'out' of the season,—and their extensive woods appeared to exist chiefly for the preservation of game, reared solely to be shot by a few idle louts of fashion during September and October, and also for the convenience and support of a certain land agent, one Oliver Leach, who cut down fine old timber whenever he needed money, and thought it advisable to pocket the proceeds of such devastation.

Scarcely in one instance out of a hundred did the actual owners of property miss the trees sufficiently to ask what had become of them. So long as the game was all right, they paid little heed to the rest. The partridges and the pheasants thrived, and so did Mr. Oliver Leach. He enjoyed, however, the greatest unpopularity of any man in the neighbourhood, which was some small comfort to those who believed in the laws of compensation and justice. Bainton was his particular enemy for one, and Bainton's master, John Walden, for another. His long-practised 'knavish tricks' and the malicious delight he took in trying to destroy or disfigure the sylvan beauty of the landscape by his brutish ignorance of the art of forestry, combined with his own personal greed, were beginning to be well-known in St. Rest, and it is very certain that on May-morning, when the youngsters of the village were abroad and,

to a great extent, had it all their own way, (aided and abetted in that way by the recognised authority of the place, the minister himself,) he would never have dared to show his hard face and stiffly upright figure anywhere, lest he should be unmercifully 'guyed' without a chance of rescue or appeal.

With the disappearance of the Maypole into the further meadow, Bainton likewise disappeared on his round of duty, which, as he had declared, moved him 'in sundry places,' and for a little while the dove-like spirit of Spring brooded in restful silence over the quiet orchard and garden.

The singing of the May-day children had now grown so faint and far as to be scarcely audible,—and the call of the cuckoo shrilling above the plaintive murmur of the wood pigeons, soon absorbed even the echo of the young human voices passing away. A light breeze stirred the tender green grass, shaking, down a shower of pink almond bloom as it swept fan-like through the luminous air,—a skylark half lost in the brilliant blue, began to descend earthwards, flinging out a sparkling fountain of music with every quiver of his jewel-like wings, and away in the sheltered shade of a small hazel copse, the faint fluty notes of a nightingale trembled with a mysterious sweetness suggestive of evening, when the song should be full.

More than an hour elapsed, and no living being entered the seclusion of the parson's garden save Nebbie, the parson's rough Aberdeen terrier, who, appearing suddenly at the open study-window, sniffed at the fair prospect for a moment, and then, stepping out with a leisurely air of proprietorship lay down on the grass in the full sunshine. A wise-looking dog was Nebbie,—though few would have thought that his full name was Nebuchadnezzar. Only the Reverend John knew that. Nebbie was perfectly aware that the children had come with the Maypole, and that his master had accompanied them to the big meadow. Nebbie also knew that presently that same master of his would return again to make the circuit of the garden in the company of Bainton, according to custom,—and as he stretched his four hairy paws out comfortably, and blinked his brown eyes at a portly blackbird prodding in the

turf for a worm within a stone's throw of him, he was evidently considering whether it would be worth his while, as an epicurean animal, to escort these two men on their usual round on such a warm pleasant morning. For it was a dog's real lazy day,—a day when merely to lie on the grass was sufficient satisfaction for the canine mind. And Nebbie, yawning extensively, and stretching himself a little more, closed his eyes in a rapture of peace, and stirred his tail slightly with one, two, three mild taps on the soft grass, when a sudden clear whistle caused him to spring up with every hair bristling on end, fore-paws well forward and eyes wide open.

"Nebbie! Nebbie!"

Nebbie was nothing if not thoroughbred, and the voice of his master was, despite all considerations of sleep and sunshine, to him as the voice of the commanding officer to a subaltern. He was off like a shot at a tearing pace, nose down and tail erect, and in less than a minute had scented Walden in the shrubbery, which led by devious windings down from the orchard to the banks of the river Rest, and there finding him, started frantically gambolling round and round him, as though years had parted man and dog from one another, instead of the brief space of an hour. Walden was smiling to himself, and his countenance was extremely pleasant. Nebbie, with the quaint conceit common to pet animals, imagined that the smile was produced specially for him, and continued his wild jumps and barks till his red tongue hung a couple of inches out of his mouth with excess of heat and enthusiasm.

"Nebbie! Nebbie!" said the Reverend John, mildly; "Don't make such a noise! Down, lad, down!"

Nebbie subsided, and on reaching the river bank, squatted on his haunches, with his tongue still lolling out, while he watched his master step on a small floating pier attached by iron chains and posts to the land, and bend therefrom over into the clear water, looking anxiously downward to a spot he well knew, where hundreds of rare water-lilies were planted deep in the bed of the stream.

"'Nymphea Odorata,"—he murmured, in the yearning tone of

a lover addressing his beloved;—"Nymphea Chromatella——now I wonder if I shall see anything of them this year! The Aurora Caroliniana must have been eaten up by water-rats!"

Nebbie uttered a short bark. The faintest whisper of 'rats' seriously affected his nerves. He could have told his master many a harrowing story of those mischievous creatures swimming to and fro in the peaceful flood, tearing with their sharp teeth at the lily roots, and making a horrible havoc of all the most perfect buds of promise. The river Rest itself was so clear and bright that it was difficult to associate rats with its silver flowing,—yet rats there were, hiding among the osiers and sedges, frightening the moorhens and reed-warblers out of their little innocent lives. Nebbie caught and killed them whenever he could,—but he had no particular taste for swimming, and he was on rather 'strained relations' with a pair of swans who, with a brood of cygnets kept fierce guard on the opposite bank against all unwelcome intrusion.

His careful examination of the lily beds done, John Walden sprang back again from the pier to the land, and there hesitated a moment. His eyes rested longingly on a light punt, which, running half out of a rustic boathouse, swayed suggestively on the gleaming water.

"I wish I had time,—" he said, half aloud, while Nebbie wagging his tail violently, sat waiting and expectant. The river looked deliciously tempting. The young green of the silver birches drooping above its shining surface, the lights and shadows rippling across it with every breath of air,—the skimming of swallows to and fro,—the hum of bees among the cowslips, thyme and violets that were pushing fragrantly through the clipped turf,—were all so many wordless invitations to him to go forth into the fair freedom of Nature.

"The green trees whispered low and mild,
It was a sound of joy!
They were my playmates when a child,
And rocked me in their arms so wild!
Still they looked on me and smiled
As if I were a boy!"

Such simple lines,—by Longfellow too, the despised of all the Sir Oracles of criticism,—yet coming to Walden's memory suddenly, they touched a chord of vivid emotion.

"And still they whispered soft and low!
Oh, I could not choose but go!"

he hummed half under his breath, and then with a decided movement turned from the winding river towards the house.

"No, Nebbie, it's no use," he said aloud, addressing his four-footed comrade, who thereupon got up reluctantly and began to trot pensively beside him—"We mustn't be selfish. There are a thousand and one things to do. There is dinner to be served to the children at two o'clock—there is Mrs. Keeley to call upon—there are the school accounts to be looked into,—" here he glanced at his watch—"Good Heavens!—how time flies! It is half-past eleven! I shall have to see Bainton later on."

He hurried his steps and was just in sight of his study window, when he was met by his parlourmaid, a neat, trim young woman who rejoiced in the euphonious name of Hester Rockett, and who said as she approached him:

"If you please, sir, Mrs. Spruce."

His genial face fell a little, and he heaved a short sigh.

"Mrs. Spruce? Oh Lord!—I mean, very well! Show her in, Hester. You are sure she wants to see me? Or is it her girl Kitty she is after?"

"She didn't mention Kitty, sir," replied Hester demurely; "She said she wished to see you very particular."

"All right! Show her into my study, and afterwards just go round to the orchard and tell Bainton I will see him when he's had his dinner. I know I sha'n't get off under an hour at least!"

He sighed again, then smiled, and entered the house, Nebbie sedately following. Arrived in his own quiet sanctum, he took off his soft slouched hat and seated himself at his desk with a composed air of patient attention, as the door was opened to admit a matronly-looking lady with a round and florid coun-

tenance, clad in a voluminous black gown, and wearing a somewhat aggressive black bonnet, 'tipped' well forward, under which her grey hair was plastered so far back as to be scarcely visible. There was a certain aggrieved dignity about her, and a generally superior tone of self-consciousness even in the curtsey which she dropped respectfully, as she returned Walden's kindly nod and glance.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Spruce!"

"Good-morning, sir! I trust I see you well, sir?"

"Thank you, Mrs. Spruce, I am very well."

"Which is a mercy indeed!" said Mrs. Spruce fervently; "For we never knows from one day to another whether we may be sound or crippled, considering the diseases which now flies in the air with the dust in the common road, as the papers tell us,—and dust is a thing we cannot prevent, do what we may, for the dust is there by the will of the Almighty, Who made us all out of it."

She paused. John Walden smiled and pointed to a chair.

"Won't you sit down, Mrs. Spruce?"

"Thank you, kindly, sir!" and Mrs. Spruce accordingly plumped into the seat indicated with evident relief and satisfaction. "I will confess that it is a goodish step to walk on such a warm morning."

"You have come straight from the Manor?" enquired Walden, turning over a few papers on his desk, and wondering within himself when the good woman was going to unburden herself of her business.

"Straight from the Manor, sir, yes,—and such a heat and moil I never felt on any May morning, which is most onwholesome, I am sure. A cold May and a warm June is what I prefers myself,—but when you get the cuckoo and the nightingale clicketin' together in the woods on the First of May, you can look out for quarrelsome weather at Midsummer, leastways so I have heard my mother often say, and she was considered a wise woman in her time, I do assure you!"

Here Mrs. Spruce untied her bonnet-strings and flung them

apart,—she likewise loosened the top button of her collar and heaved a deep sigh. Again the Reverend John smiled, and vaguely balanced a penholder on his fore-finger.

"I daresay your mother was quite right, Mrs. Spruce! Indeed, I believe all our mothers were quite right in their day. All the same, I'm glad it's a fine May morning, for the children's sakes. They are all down in the big meadow having a romp together. Your little Kitty is with them, looking as bright as a May blossom herself."

Mrs. Spruce straightened herself up, patted her ample bosom with one hand, and threw her bonnet-strings still further back.

"Kitty's a good lass," she said, "though a bit mettlesome and wild; but I'm not saying anything again her. The Lord forbid that I should run down my own flesh and blood! An' she's better than most gels of her age. I wouldn't grudge her a bit of fun while she's got it in her,—Heaven knows it'll be soon gone out of her when she marries, which nat'rally she will do, sooner or later. Anyhow, she's all I've got,—which is a marvel how the Lord deals with some of us, when you see a little chidester of a woman like Adam Frost's wife with fifteen boys and girls, and me with only one nesh maid."

Walden was silent. He was not disposed to argue on such marvels of the Lord's way, as resulted in endowing one family with fifteen children, and the other with only a single sprout, such as was accorded to the righteous Jephthah, judge of Israel.

"Howsomever," continued Mrs. Spruce. "Kitty's welcome to jump round the Maypole till she's wore her last pair of boots out, if so be it's your wish, Mr. Walden,—and many thanks to you, sir, for all your kindness to her!"

"Don't mention it, Mrs. Spruce!" said Walden amicably, and then, determining to bring the worthy woman sharply round to the real object of her visit, he gave a side-glance at the clock. "Is there anything you want me to do for you this morning? I'm rather busy——"

"Beggin' your pardon, I'm sure, sir, for troubling you at all!—knowin' as I do that what with the moithering old folks

and the maupsing young ones, your 'ands is always full. But when I got the letter this morning, I says to my husband, William—'William,' says I, very loud, for the poor creature's growing so deaf that by and by I shall be usin' a p'lice whistle to make him 'ear me—'William,' says I, 'there is only one man in this village who's got the right to give advice when advice is asked for. Of course there's no call for us to follow advice, even when we gets it,—howsomever, it's only respectable for decent church-going folks to see the minister of the parish whenever there's any fear of our makin' a slip of our souls and goin' wrong. Therefore, William,' says I, shaking him by the arm to make the poor silly fool understand me, 'it's to Passon Walden I'm goin' this mornin' with this letter, —to Passon Walden, d'ye 'ear?' And he nodded his head wise-like, for all the world as though there were a bit of sense in it, (which there ain't), and agrees with me;—for the Lord knows, if William doesn't, that it may make an awsome change for him as well as for me. And I do confess I've been took back."

Following as best he could the entangled thread of the estimable lady's discourse, Walden grasped the fact, albeit vaguely, that some unexpected letter with unexpected news in it had arrived to trouble the Spruces' domestic peace. Suppressing a slight yawn, he endeavoured to assume the proper show of interest which every village parson is expected to display on the shortest notice concerning any subject, from the birth of the latest baby parishioner, to the death of the earliest sucking pig.

"I'm sorry you're in trouble, Mrs. Spruce," he said kindly; "What letter are you speaking of? You see I don't quite understand——"

"Which it's not to be expected you should, sir!" replied Mrs. Spruce with an air of triumph,—"Considerin' as you weren't here when she left, and the Manor has been what you may call a stately 'ome of England deserted as most stately 'omes are, for more'n ten years, you couldn't be expected to understand!"

The Reverend John looked as he felt, completely mystified. He 'wasn't here when she left.' Who was 'she'? With all his naturally sweet temper he began to feel slightly irritated.

"Really, Mrs. Spruce," he said, endeavouring to throw an inflection of sternness into his mellow voice, "I must ask you to explain matters a little more clearly. I know that the Manor has been practically shut up ever since I've been here,—that you are the housekeeper in charge, and that your husband is woodman or forester there,—but beyond this I know nothing. So you must not talk in riddles, Mrs. Spruce,"—here his kind smile shone out again—"Even as a boy I was never good at guessing them! And I am getting old now."

"So you are, sir—so you are!" agreed Mrs. Spruce sympathetically; "And 'tis a shame for me to come worryin' of you,—for no one more truly than myself can feel pity for the weariness of the flesh, when 'tis just a burden to the bones and no pleasure in the carryin' of it, though you don't put much of it on, Passon Walden, you don't, I do assure you! But it's Gospel truth that some folks wears thin like a knife, while others wears thick like a pig, and there is no stopping them,—either way bein' the Lord's will,—but I'm feelin' real okkard myself to have put you about, Passon, only as I said, I've been took back,—and here's the letter, sir, which if you will kindly glance your hi over, you will tell me whether I've done the right thing to call on my way down here and get in a couple of scrubbers at eighteen-pence a day, which is dear, but they won't come for less, jest to get some of the rough dirt off the floors afore polishin', which polishin' will have to be done whether we will or no, for the boards are solid oak, and bein' ancient take the shine quickly, which is a mercy, for this day week is none too far off, seein' all that's put upon me suddint."

Here, being short of breath, she paused, and fumbling in a large black calico pocket which hung loosely at her side, attached to her ample waist by a string, she drew out with great care a rather large, square-looking missive, and then rising from her chair with much fluttering of her black gown

and mysterious creaking sound, as of tight under-wear strained to breaking point, she held it out toward Walden, who had, during her last oratorical outburst unconsciously put his hand to his head in a daze of bewilderment.

"There is the letter, sir," she continued, in the tone of one who should say: 'There is the warrant for execution'—"'Short and sweet,' as the farmer's wife said when she ate the pig's tail what dropped off while the animal was a-roastin'."

Allowing this brilliant simile to pass without comment, Walden took the thick, creamy-white object she offered and found himself considering it with a curious disfavour. It was a strictly 'fashionable' make of envelope, and was addressed in a particularly bold and assertive hand-writing to

Mrs. Spruce,
Housekeeper,
Abbot's Manor,
St. Rest.

Opening it, the Reverend John read as follows:

"Miss Vancourt begs to inform Mrs. Spruce that she will arrive at Abbot's Manor on the 7th inst., to remain there in residence. Mrs. Spruce is requested to engage the necessary household servants, as Miss Vancourt will bring none except the groom in charge of her two hunters."

Over and over again Walden read this curt and commonplace note, with a sense of irritation which he knew was perfectly absurd, but which, nevertheless, defied all reason. The paper on which it was written was thick and satiny,—and there was a faint artificial odour of violets about it which annoyed him. He hated scented notepaper. Deliberately he replaced it in its envelope, and holding it for a moment as he again studied the superscription, he addressed the expectant Mrs. Spruce, who had re-seated herself and was waiting for him to speak.

"Well, Mrs. Spruce, I don't think you need any advice from me on such a simple matter as this," he said slowly. "Your duty is quite plain. You must obey orders. Miss Vancourt is, I suppose, the mistress of Abbot's Manor?"

"She is, sir,—of course it all belongs to Miss Maryllia——"

"Miss——what?" interrupted Walden, with a sudden lightening of his dark blue eyes.

"Maryllia, sir. It is a kind of family name, pronounced 'Ma—rill—yer,'" explained Mrs. Spruce with considerable pomposity; "Many folks never gets it right—it wants knowledge and practice. But if you remember the pictures in the gallery at the Manor, sir, you may call to mind one of the ancestresses of the Vancourts, painted in a vi'let velvet ridin' dress and holdin' a huntin' crop, and the name underneath is 'Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt' and it was after her that the old Squire called his daughter Maryllia, rollin' the two fust names, Mary Elia, into one, as it were, just to make a name what none of his forebears had ever had. He was a queer man, the old Squire—he wouldn't a-cared whether the name was Christian or heathen."

"I suppose not," said the Reverend John carelessly, rising and pushing back his chair with a slightly impatient gesture; whereupon Mrs. Spruce rose too, and stood 'at attention,' her loosened bonnet-strings flying and her large black calico pocket well in evidence to the front of her skirt.

"Here's your letter, Mrs. Spruce;" and as she took it from his hand with a curtsey he continued: "There is evidently nothing for it but to get the house in order by the day appointed and do your best to please the lady. I can quite understand that you feel a little worried at having to prepare everything so quickly and unexpectedly,—but after all, you must have often thought that Miss Vancourt's return to her old home was likely to happen at any time."

"Which I never did, sir!" declared Mrs. Spruce emphatically, "No, sir, never! For when the old Squire died, she was jest a slip of fifteen and her uncle, the Squire's own twin brother, what had married an American heiress with somethin' like a hundred million of money, so I'm told, took her straight away and adopted her like, and the reg'ler pay for keepin' up the Manor and grounds has been sent to us through a Bank, and so far we've got nothin' to complain of,

bein' all strictly honourable both ways, but of Miss Vancourt we never heard a thing. And Mr. Oliver Leach he is the agent of the property, and he ain't never said a word,—and we think, me and my husband, that he don't know nothin' of her comin' back, and should we tell him, sir? Or would you reckon that we'd better keep a still tongue in our heads till she do come? For there's no knowin' why or wherefore she's comin',—though we did hear her poor uncle died two years ago, and we wondered where she and her aunt with the hundred million was got to—but mebbe she'll change her mind and not come, after all?"

"I should certainly not count upon that, if I were you, Mrs. Spruce," said Walden decisively; "Your business is to keep everything in order for the lady's arrival; but I don't think,—I really don't think, you are at all bound to inform Mr. Oliver Leach of the matter. He will no doubt find out for himself, or receive his orders direct from Miss Vancourt." Here he paused. "How old did you say she was when she went away from home?"

"Fifteen, sir. That was nigh eleven years ago,—just one week after the Squire's funeral, and a year afore you came here, sir. She's gettin' on for seven-and-twenty now."

"Quite a woman, then," said Walden lightly; "Old enough to know her own mind at any rate. Do you remember her?"

"Perfectly well, sir,—a little flitterin' creature all eyes and hair, with a saucy way of tossin' her curls about, and a trick of singin' and shoutin' all over the place. She used to climb the pine trees and sit in them and pelt her father with the cones. Oh, yes, sir, she was a terrible child to rule, and it's Gospel truth there was no ruling her, for the governesses came and went like the seasons, one in, t'other out. Ay, but the Lord knows I'll never forget the scream she gave when the Squire was brought home from the hunting field stone dead!"

Here John Walden turned his head towards her with an air of more interest than he had yet shown.

"Ah!—How was that?" he enquired.

"He was killed jumpin' a fence;" went on Mrs. Spruce; "A fine, handsome gentleman,—they say he'd been wild in his youth; anyhow he got married in London to a great Court beauty, so I've been told. And after the wedding, they went travelling all over the world for a year and a half, and just when they was expected 'ome Mrs. Vancourt died with the birth of the child, and he and the baby and the nurses all came back here and he never stirred away again himself till death took him at full gallop,—which is 'ow he always wished to die. But poor Miss Maryllia—" And Mrs. Spruce sighed dolefully—"'Twas hard on her, seein' him ride off so gay and well and cheery in the early mornin' to be brought home afore noon a corpse! Ay, it was an awsome visitation of the Lord! Often when the wind goes wimblin' through the pines near the house I think I 'ear her shriek now,—ay, sir!—it was like the cry of somethin' as was havin' its heart tore out!"

Walden stood very silent, listening. This narrative was new to him, and even Mrs. Spruce's manner of relating it was not without a certain rough eloquence. The ancient history of the Vancourts he knew as well as he knew the priceless archæological value of their old Manor-house as a perfect gem of unspoilt Tudor architecture,—but though he had traced the descent of the family from Robert Priaulx de Vaignecourt of the twelfth century and his brother Osmonde Priaulx de Vaignecourt who had, it was rumoured, founded a monastery in the neighbourhood, and had died during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, he had ceased to follow the genealogical tree with much attention or interest when the old Norman name of De Vaignecourt had degenerated into De Vincourt and finally in the time of James I. had settled down into Vancourt. Yet there was a touch of old-world tragedy in Mrs. Spruce's modern history of the young girl's shriek when she found herself suddenly fatherless on that fatal hunting morning.

"And now," continued Mrs. Spruce, coaxing one bonnet-string at a time off each portly shoulder with considerable

difficulty; "I s'pose I must be goin', Passon Walden, and thank you kindly for all! It's a great weight off my mind to have told you just what's 'appened, an' the changes likely to come off, and I do assure you I'm of your opinion, Passon, in letting Oliver Leach shift for himself, for if so be Miss Vancourt has the will of her own she had when she was a gel, I shouldn't wonder if there was rough times in store for him! But the Lord only knows what may chance to all of us!" and here she heaved another dismal sigh as she tied the refractory bonnet-strings into a bow under her fat chin. "It's right-down sinful of me to be wishin' rough times to any man, seein' I'm likely in for them myself, for a person's bound to be different at nigh seven-and-twenty to what she was at fifteen, and the modern ways of leddies ain't old ways, the Lord be merciful to us all! And I do confess, Passon, it's a bit upsettin' at my time of life to think as how I've lived in Abbot's Manor all these years, and now for all I can tell, me and William may have to shift. And where we'll go, the Lord only knows!"

"Now don't anticipate misfortune, Mrs. Spruce!" said Walden, beginning to shake off the indescribable feeling of annoyance against which he had been fighting for the past few minutes and resuming his usual quiet air of cheerfulness; "Miss Vancourt is not likely to dismiss you unless you offend her. The great thing is to avoid offence,—and to do even more than your strict duty in making her old home look its best and brightest for her return and——" Here he hesitated for a moment, then went on——"Of course if I can do anything to help you, I will."

"Thank you, sir, I'm sure most kindly," said Mrs. Spruce curtseying two or three times in a voluminous overflow of gratitude. "I shall take the liberty of asking you to step up during the week, to see how things appears to you yourself. And as for servants, there's no gels old enough at the school for servants, so I'll be goin' to Riversford with the carrier's cart to-morrow to see what I can do. Ah, it's an awsome mission I'm goin' on; there ain't no gels to be got of the

old kind, as far as I can make out. They all wants to be fine leddies nowadays and marry 'Merican millionaires."

"Not quite so bad as that, I think, Mrs. Spruce!" laughed Walden, holding open the door of the study for her to pass out, as a broad hint that the interview must be considered at an end,—"There are plenty of good, industrious, intelligent girls in England ready and willing to enter domestic service, if we make it worth their while,—and I'm sure no one can teach *you* anything in that line! Good-morning, Mrs. Spruce!"

"Good-morning, sir,—and you'll step up to the Manor when convenient some afternoon?"

"Certainly, if you wish it. Whenever convenient to yourself, Mrs. Spruce."

Mrs. Spruce curtseyed again at the respect for her own importance which was implied in Walden's last sentence, and slowly sidled out, the 'Passon' watching her with a smile as she trotted down the passage from his study to a door which led to the kitchen and basement.

"Now she'll go and tell all her story again to Hester and the cook," he said to himself; "And how she will enjoy herself to be sure! Bless the woman, what a tongue she has! No wonder her husband is deaf!"

He re-seated himself at his desk, and taking up a bundle of accounts connected with the church and the school, tried to fix his attention on them, but in vain. His mind wandered. He was obliged to own to himself that he was unreasonably irritated at the news that Abbot's Manor, which had been so long a sort of unoccupied 'show' house, was again to be inhabited,—and by one who was its rightful owner too. Ever since he had bought the living of St. Rest he had been accustomed to take many solitary walks through the lovely woods surrounding the Vancourts' residence, without any fear of being considered a trespasser,—and he had even strolled through the wide, old-fashioned gardens with as little restraint as though they had belonged to himself, Mrs. Spruce, the housekeeper being the last person in the world to forbid her

minister to enter wherever he would. He had passed long hours of delightful research in the old library, and many afternoons of meditation in the picture-gallery, where the portrait of the lady in the 'vi'let velvet,' Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt, had often caught his eye and charmed his fancy when the setting sun had illumined its rich colouring and had given life to the face, half-petulant, half-sweet, which pouted forth from the old canvas like a rose with light on its petals. Now all these pleasant rambles were finished. The mistress of Abbot's Manor would certainly object to a wandering parson in her house and grounds. Probably she was a very imperious, disagreeable young woman,—full of the light scorn, lack of sentiment and cheap atheism common to the 'smart' lady of a decadent period, and if it were true that she had been for so many years in the charge of an American aunt with a 'hundred millions,' the chances were ten to one that she would be an exceedingly unpleasant neighbour.

He gave a short impatient sigh.

"Ah, well! I only hope she will put a stop to the felling of the fine old trees in her domain," he said half aloud,—"If no one else in the village has the pluck to draw her attention to the depredations of Oliver Leach, I will. But, so far as other matters go,—my walks in the Manor woods are ended! Yes, Nebbie!" and he gently patted the head of the faithful animal, who, with inborn sagacity instinctively guessing that his master was somewhat annoyed, was clambering with caressing forepaws against his knee. "Our rambles by the big elms and silvery birches and under the beautiful tall pines are over, Nebbie! and we shouldn't be human if we weren't just a trifle sorry! Sir Morton Pippitt is bad enough as a neighbour, but he's a good three miles off at Badsworth Hall, thank Heaven!—whereas Abbot's Manor is but a quarter of an hour's walk from this gate. We've had pleasant times in the dear old-fashioned gardens, Nebbie, you and I, but it's all over! The mistress of the Manor is coming home,—and I'm positively certain, Nebbie,—yes, old boy!—positively certain that we shall both detest her!"

CHAPTER III

WHEN England's great Queen, Victoria the Good, was still enjoying her first happy years of wedded life, and society, under her gentle sway, was less ostentatious and much more sincere in its code of ethics than it is nowadays, the village of St. Rest, together with the adjacent post-town of Riversford, enjoyed considerable importance in county chronicles. Very great 'county personages' were daily to be seen comporting themselves quite simply among their own tenantry, and the Riversford Hunt Ball annually gathered together a veritable galaxy of 'fair women and brave men' who loved their ancestral homes better than all the dazzle and movement of town, and who possessed for the most part that 'sweet content' which gives strength to the body and elasticity to the mind. There was then a natural gaiety and spontaneous cheerfulness in English country life that made such a life good for human happiness; and the jolly Squires who with their 'dames' kept open house and celebrated Harvest Home and Christmas Festival with all the buoyancy and vigour of a sane and healthful manhood undeteriorated by any sickly taint of morbid pessimism and indifferent inertia, were the beneficent rulers of a merrier rural population than has ever been seen since their day. Squire Vancourt the elder, grandfather of the present heiress of Abbot's Manor, had been a splendid specimen of 'the fine old English gentleman, all of the olden time,' and his wife, one of the handsomest, as well as one of the kindest-hearted women that ever lived, had been justly proud of her husband, devoted to

her children, and a true friend and benefactress to the neighbourhood. Her four sons, two of whom were twins, all great strapping lads, built on their vigorous father's model, were considered the best-looking young men in the county, and by their fond mother were judged as the best-hearted; but, as it often happens, Nature was freakish in their regard, and turned them all out wild colts of a baser breed than might have been expected from their unsullied parentage. The eldest took to hard drinking and was killed at steeple-chasing; the second was drowned while bathing; one of the twins, named Frederick, the younger by a few minutes, after nearly falling into unnameable depths of degradation by gambling with certain 'noble and exalted' personages of renown, saved himself, as it were, by the skin of his teeth, through marriage with a rich American girl whose father was blessed with unlimited oil-mines. He was thereby enabled to wallow in wealth with an impaired digestion and shattered nervous power, while capricious Fate played him her usual trick in her usual way by denying him any heirs to his married millions. His first-born brother, Robert, wedded for love, and chose as his mate a beautiful girl without a penny, whose grace and charm had dazzled the London world of fashion for about two seasons, and she had died at the age of twenty in giving birth to her first child, the girl whom her father had named Maryllia.

All these chances and changes of life, however, occurring to the leading family of the neighbourhood had left very little mark on St. Rest, which drowsed under the light shadow of the eastern hills by its clear flowing river, very much as it had always drowsed in the old days, and very much as it would always do even if London and Paris were consumed by unsuspected volcanoes. The memory of the first 'old Squire,'—who died peacefully in his bed all alone, his wife having passed away two years before him, and his two living twin sons being absent, —was frequently mixed with stories of the other 'old Squire' Robert, the elder twin, who was killed in the hunting field,— and indeed it often happened that some of the more ancient and garrulous villagers were not at all sure as to which was

which. The Manor had been shut up for ten years,—the Manor 'family' had not been heard of during all that period, and the tenantry's recollection of their late landlord, as well as of his one daughter, was more vague and confused than authentic. The place had been 'managed' and the cottage rents collected by the detested agent Oliver Leach, a fact which did not sweeten such remembrance of the Vancourts as still existed in the minds of the people.

However, nothing in the general aspect and mental attitude of the village had altered very much since the early thirties, except the church. That from a mere ruin, had under John Walden's incumbency become a gem of architecture, so unique and perfect as to be the wonder and admiration of all who beheld it, and whereas in the early Victorian reign a few people stopped at Riversford because it was a county town and because there was an inn there where they could put up their horses, so a few people now went to St. Rest, because there was a church there worth looking at. They came by train to Riversford where the railway line stopped, and then took carriage or cycled the seven miles between that town and St. Rest to see the church; and having seen it, promptly went back again. For one of the great charms of the little village hidden under the hills was that no tourist could stay a night in it, unless he or she took one spare room—there was only one—at the small public-house which sneaked away up round a corner of the street under an archway of ivy, and pushed its old gables through the dark enshrouding leaves with a half-surprised, half-propitiatory air, as though somewhat ashamed of its own existence. With the exception of this one room in this one public-house, there was no accommodation for visitors. Never will the rash cyclist who ventured once to appeal to the sexton's wife for rooms in her cottage, forget the brusqueness of his reception:

"Rooms!" And Mrs. Frost, setting her arms well akimbo, surveyed the enquirer scornfully through an open doorway, rendered doubly inviting by the wealth of roses clambering round it. "Be off, young man! Where was you a-comin'

to? D'ye think a woman wi' fifteen great boys and girls in an' out of the 'ouse all day, 'as rooms for payin' guests!" And here Mrs. Frost, snorting at the air in irrepressible disdain, actually snapped her fingers in her would-be lodger's face. "Rooms indeed! Go to Brighting!"

Whereupon the abashed wheelman went, — whether to Brighton, as the irate lady suggested, or to a warmer place unmentionable, history sayeth not. But St. Rest remained, as its name implied, restful,—and the barbaric yell of the cheap tripper, together with the equally barbaric scream of the cheap tripper's 'young lady' echoed chiefly through modernised and vulgarised Riversford, where there were tea-rooms and stuffy eating-houses and bad open-air concerts, such as trippers and their 'ladies' delight in,—and seldom disturbed the tranquil charm of the tiny mediæval village dear to a certain few scholars, poets and antiquarians who, through John Walden, had gradually become acquainted with this 'priceless bit' as they termed it, of real 'old' England, and who almost feared to mention its existence even in a whisper, lest it should be 'swarmed over' by enquiring Yankees, searching for those everlasting ancestors who all managed so cleverly to cross the sea together in one boat, the Mayflower.

There is something truly pathetic as well as droll in the anxiety of every true American to prove himself or herself an offshoot from some old British root of honour or nobility. It would be cruel to laugh at this instinct, for after all it is only the passionate longing of the Prodigal Son who, having eaten of the husks that the swine did eat, experienced such an indigestion at last, that he said 'I will arise and go to my father.' And it is quite possible that an aspiring Trans-Atlantic millionaire yearning for descent more than dollars, would have managed to find tracks of a Mayflower pedigree in St. Rest, a place of such antiquity as to be able to boast a chivalric 'roll of honour' once kept in the private museum at Badsworth Hall before the Badsworth family became extinct, but now, thanks to Walden, rescued from the modern clutch of the Hall's present proprietor, Sir Morton Pippitt,

and carefully preserved in an iron box locked up in the church, along with other documents of value belonging to the neighbourhood. On this were inscribed the names of such English gentlemen once resident in the district, who had held certain possessions in France at the accession of Henry II. in 1154. Besides the 'roll of honour' there were other valuable records having to do with the Anglo-French campaigns in the time of King John, and much concerning those persons of St. Rest and Riversford who took part in the Wars of the Barons.

Whatever there was of curious or interesting matter respecting the village and its surroundings had been patiently ferreted out by John Walden, who had purchased the living partly because he knew it to be a veritable mine for antiquarian research, and one likely to afford him inexhaustible occupation and delight. But there were, of course, other reasons for his settling down in so remote a spot far from the busy haunts of men,—reasons which, to his own mind, were perfectly natural and simple, though on account of his innate habit of reticence, and disinclination to explain his motives to others, they were by some supposed to be mysterious. In his youth he had been one of the most brilliant and promising of University scholars, and all those who had assisted to fit him for his career in the Church, had expected great things of him. Some said he would be a Bishop before he was thirty; others considered that he would probably content himself with being the most intellectual and incisive preacher of his time. But he turned out to be neither one nor the other. A certain Henry Arthur Brent, his fellow student at College and five years his senior, had, with apparent ease, outstripped him in the race for honour, though lacking in all such exceptional mental ability as he possessed, and was now Bishop of the very diocese in which he had his little living. University men said he had 'stood aside' in order to allow Brent to press more swiftly forward, but though this was a perfectly natural supposition on the part of those who knew something of Walden's character, it was not correct. Walden at that time had only one object in life,—and this was to

secure such name and fame, together with such worldly success as might delight and satisfy the only relative he had in the world, his sister, a beautiful and intelligent woman, full of an almost maternal tenderness for him, and a sweet resignation to her own sad lot, which made her the victim of a slow and incurable disease. So long as she lived, her brother threw himself into his work with intensity and ardour; but when she died that impulse withered, as it were, at its very root. The world became empty for him, and he felt that from henceforth he would be utterly companionless. For what he had seen of modern women, modern marriage and modern ways of life, did not tempt him to rashly seek refuge for his heart's solitude in matrimony. Almost immediately following the loss of his sister, an uncle of whom he had known very little, died suddenly, leaving him a considerably large fortune. As soon as he came into possession of this unexpected wealth, he disappeared at once from the scene of his former labours,—the pretty old house in the University town, with its great cedars sloping to the river and its hallowed memories of the sister he had so dearly loved, was sold by private treaty,—his voice was heard no more in London pulpits, where it had begun to carry weight and influence,—and he managed to obtain the then vacant and obscure living of St. Rest, the purchase of the advowson being effected, so it was said, privately through the good offices of his quondam college friend, Bishop Brent. And at St. Rest he had remained, apparently well contented with the very simple and monotonous round of duty it offered.

When he had first arrived there, he found that the church consisted of some thick stone walls of the early Norman period, built on a cruciform plan, the stones being all uniformly wrought and close-jointed,—together with a beautiful ruined chancel divided from the main body of the building by massive columns, which supported on their capitals the fragments of lofty arches indicative of an architectural transition from the Norman to the Early Pointed English style. There were also the hollow slits of several lancet windows, and one almost

perfect pierced circular window to the east, elaborately carved with traceries of natural fruit and foliage, which were scarcely injured by the devastating mark of time. But rough and sacrilegious hands had been at work to spoil and deface the classic remains of the time-worn edifice, and some of the lancet windows had been actually hewn out and widened to admit of the insertion of modern timber props which awkwardly supported a hideous galvanised iron roof, on the top of which was erected a kind of tin hen-coop in which a sharp bell clanged with irritating rapidity for Sunday service. Outside, the building was thus rendered grotesquely incongruous,—inside it was almost blasphemous in its rank ugliness. There were several rows of narrow pews made of common painted deal,—there was a brown stone font and a light pine-wood pulpit—a small harmonium stood in one corner, festooned by a faded red woollen curtain, and a general air of the cheap upholsterer and jerry-builder hovered over the whole concern. And the new incumbent, gazing aghast at the scene, was triumphantly informed that "Sir Morton Pippitt had been generous enough to roof and 'restore' the church in this artistic manner out of his own pocket, for the comfort of the villagers," and moreover that he actually condescended to attend Divine service under the galvanised iron roof which he had so liberally erected. Nay, it had been even known that Sir Morton had on one or two occasions himself read the Lessons in the absence of the late rector, who was subject to sore throats and was constantly compelled to call in outside assistance.

To all this information John Walden said nothing. He was not concerned with Sir Morton Pippitt or any other county magnate in the management of his own affairs. A fortnight after his arrival he quietly announced to his congregation that the church was about to be entirely restored according to its original lines of architecture, and that a temporary building would be erected on his, Walden's, own land for the accommodation of the people during such time as the restoration should be in progress. This announcement brought about

Walden's first acquaintance with his richest neighbour, Sir Morton Pippitt. That gentleman having been accustomed to have his own way in everything concerning St. Rest, for a considerable time, straightway wrote, expressing his 'surprise and indignation' at the mere assumption that any restoration was required for the church beyond what he, Sir Morton, had effected at his own expense. The number of parishioners was exceedingly small,—too small to warrant any further expenditure for enlarging a place of worship which, (considering that some years ago it had been a mere roofless ruin, and that the people had been compelled to walk or drive to Riversford in order to attend church at all on Sundays) Sir Morton thought was now very comfortable and satisfactory. In fact, Sir Morton concluded, "Mr. Walden would be very ill-advised if he made any attempt to raise money for such a useless purpose as the 'entire restoration' of the church of St. Rest, and Mr. Walden might as well be at once made aware that Sir Morton himself would not give a penny towards it." To which somewhat rambling and heated epistle John Walden replied with civil stiffness as follows:

"The Rev. John Walden presents his compliments to Sir Morton Pippitt, and in answer to his letter begs to say that he has no intention of raising any subscription to defray the cost of restoring the church, which in its present condition is totally unfit for Divine service. Having secured the living, Mr. Walden will make the restoration the object of his own personal care, and will also be pleased to reimburse Sir Morton Pippitt for any outlay to which he may have been put in erecting the galvanised roof and other accessories for the immediate convenience of the parishioners who have, he understands, already expressed their sense of obligation to Sir Morton for kindly providing them with such temporary shelter from the changes of the weather as seemed to be humanely necessary."

This calm epistle when received at Badsworth Hall, had the effect of a sudden stiff breeze on the surface of hitherto quiet waters. Sir Morton Pippitt in a brand-new tweed suit

surmounted by a very high, clean, stiff shirt-collar, was sitting at breakfast in what was formerly known as the 'great Refectory,' a memory of the days when Badsworth had been a large and important monastery, but which was now turned into a modern-antique dining-room,—and as he read, with the aid of his gold-rimmed spectacles, the curt, chill, severely polite letter of the 'new parson' he flew into a sudden violent passion.

"Damn the fellow!" he spluttered, jumping up in haste and striking out an arm towards the very direction in which a mild young footman was just approaching him with a bottle of Worcester sauce on a tray,—"Damn him!"

The footman staggered back in terror, and the Worcester sauce reeled over drunkenly on to the carpet.

"There you go, you clumsy, gaping idiot!" roared Sir Morton, growing purple with increasing fury. "Tabitha!" And here he whirled round on his only daughter, an angular and severely-visaged spinster; "Look at this fool!—this staring ape! All the sauce on the carpet! Wish he had to pay for it! He'll take an hour to get a cloth and wipe it up! Why did you engage such a damned ass, eh?"

Miss Tabitha preserved a prudent silence, seeing that the butler, a serious-looking personage with a resigned-to-ill-usage demeanour, was already engaged in assisting the hapless footman to remove the remains of the spilt condiment from the offended gaze of his irate master.

"Like his damned impudence!" broke out Sir Morton again, resuming with some reluctance his seat at the breakfast-table, and chopping at the fried bacon on his plate till the harder bits flew far and wide,—'Happy to reimburse me!'—the snivelling puppy! Why the devil he was allowed to sneak into this living, I don't know! The private purchase of advowsons is a scandal—a disgraceful scandal! Any Tom, Dick or Harry can get a friend to buy him a benefice in which to make himself a nuisance! Done under the rose,—and called a 'presentation'! All humbug and hypocrisy! That's why we get impudent dogs like this beast Walden

settling down in a neighbourhood whether we like it or not!"

Miss Tabitha munched some toast slowly with a delicate regard for her front teeth, which had cost money. There was no one in the room to suggest to Sir Morton that it is a pity some law is not in progress to prevent the purchase of historic houses by vulgar and illiterate persons of no family;—which would be far more a benefit to the land at large than the suppression of privately purchased benefices. For the chances are ten to one that the ordained minister, who, by his own choice secures a Church living for himself, is likely at least to be a well-educated gentleman, interested in the work he has himself elected to do,—whereas the illiterate individual who buys an historic house simply for self-glorification, will probably be no more than a mere petty and pompous tyrant over the district which that particular house dominates.

Badsworth Hall, a fine sixteenth-century pile, had, through the reckless racing and gambling propensities of the last heir, fallen into the hands of the Jews. On the fortunate demise of the young gentleman who had brought it to this untimely end, it was put up for sale with all its contents. And Sir Morton Pippitt,—a rich colonial, whose forebears were entirely undistinguished, but who had made a large fortune by a bone-melting business, which converted the hoofs, horns and bones of defunct animals into a convenient mixture wherewith to make buttons and other useful articles of hardware, bought it, as the saying goes, 'for a mere song.' Through his easy purchase he became possessed of the Badsworth ancestry, as shown in their pictures hanging on the dining-room walls and in the long oak-panelled picture gallery. Lady Madeline Badsworth, famous for her beauty in some remote and chivalrous past, gazed down at Sir Morton while he sat at meals, suggesting to the imaginative beholder a world of scorn in her lovely painted eyes,—and a heroic young Badsworth who had perished at the battle of Marston Moor, stood proudly out of one of the dark canvases, his gauntleted hand on the hilt of his sword and a smile of pained wrath on his lips, as one who

should say, beholding the new possessor of his ancient home 'To such base uses must we come at last!'

Surrounded by gold-framed Badsworths, young and old, Sir Morton ate his fried bacon and 'swilled' his tea, with a considerable noise in swallowing, getting gradually redder in the face as he proceeded with his meal. He was by no means a bad-looking old gentleman,—his sixty years sat lightly upon his broad shoulders, and he was tall and well set-up, though somewhat too stout in what may be politely called the 'lower chest' direction. His face was plump, florid and clean-shaven, and what hair he still possessed was of a pleasantly-bright silver hue. The first impression he created was always one of kindness and benevolence,—the hearts of women especially invariably went out to him, and murmurs of 'What a dear old man!' and 'What a darling old man!' frequently escaped lips feminine in softest accents. He was very courtly to women,—when he was not rude; and very kind to the poor,—when he was not mean. His moods were fluctuating; his rages violent; his temper obstinate. When he did not succeed in getting his own way, his petulant sulks resembled those of a spoilt child put in a corner, only they lasted longer. There was one shop in Riversford which he had not entered for ten years, because its owner had ventured, with trembling respect, to contradict him on a small matter. Occasionally he could be quite the 'dear, darling old man' his lady admirers judged him to be,—but after all, his servants knew him best. To them, 'Sir Morton was a caution.' And that is precisely what he was; the definition entirely summed up his character. He had one great passion,—the desire to make himself 'the' most important person in the county, and to be written about in the local paper, a hazy and often ungrammatical organ called 'The Riversford Gazette.' If Sir Morton had a pig killed, the fact was duly notified to an admiring populace in the 'Riversford Gazette.' If he took a prize in cabbages at the local vegetable and flower show, the 'Riversford Gazette' had a column about it. If he gave a tennis-party, there were two columns, describing all the dresses of the ladies, the prowess of the 'champions'

and the 'striking and jovial personality' of Sir Morton Pippitt. And if the fact of that 'striking and jovial personality' were not properly insisted upon, Sir Morton went himself to see the editor of the 'Riversford Gazette,' an illiterate tuft-hunting little man,—and nearly frightened him into fits. He had asserted himself in this kind of autocratic fashion ever since he had purchased Badsworth, when he was still in his forties,—and it may be well imagined that at the age of sixty he was not prepared to be thwarted, even in a matter wherein he had no real concern. The former rector of St. Rest, an ailing, nervous and exceedingly poor creature, with a large family to keep, had been only too glad and ready to do anything Sir Morton Pippitt wished, for the sake of being invited to dine at the Hall once a week,—it was therefore a very unexpected and disagreeable experience for the imperious Bone-melter to learn that the new incumbent was not at all disposed to follow in the steps of his predecessor, but, on the contrary, was apparently going to insist on having his own way with as much emphasis as Sir Morton Pippitt himself.

"I shall soon bring that fellow to his senses," declared Sir Morton, on the eventful morning which first saw the gage of battle thrown down; "I shall teach him that, parson or no parson, he will have to respect my authority! God bless my soul! Does he think I'm going to be dictated to at my time of life?"

He addressed these observations to his daughter, Miss Tabitha Pippitt, but whether she heard them or not was scarcely apparent. At any rate, she did not answer. Having finished her breakfast, she pulled out some knitting from an embroidered bag hanging at her side and set her needles clicketing, while her father, redder in the face and more implacable of mood than ever, went out to see what he could do to save his galvanised iron roof from the hand of the spoiler.

But, as he might have known, if his irascibility had allowed him to weigh the pros and cons of the situation, his 'authority' was of no avail. An angry letter to the Bishop of the diocese

only drew forth a curt reply from the Bishop's secretary to the effect that as the Reverend John Walden was now the possessor of the living of St. Rest and had furthermore obtained a 'faculty' for the proper restoration of the church, which was to be carried out at the said John Walden's own risk and personal expenditure, the matter was not open to any outside discussion. Whereat, Sir Morton's fury became so excessive that he actually shut up Badsworth Hall and went away for a whole year, greatly to the relief of the editor of the 'Riversford Gazette,' who was able to dismiss him with a comfortable paragraph, thus:

"Sir Morton Pippitt has left Badsworth Hall for a tour round the world. Miss Pippitt accompanies her distinguished father."

Then followed a spell of peace;—and the restoration of the church at St. Rest was quietly proceeded with. Lovingly, and with tenderest care for every stone, every broken fragment, John Walden pieced together the ruined shrine of ancient days, and managed at last to trace and recover the whole of the original plan. It had never been a large building, its proportions being about the same as those of Roslin Chapel, near Edinburgh. The task of restoration was costly, especially when carried out with such perfection and regard to detail,—but Walden grudged nothing to make it complete, and superintended the whole thing himself, rejecting all the semi-educated suggestions of the modern architect, and faithfully following out the ideas of the particular period in which the church was originally designed by those to whom the building of a 'God's House' was a work of solemn prayer and praise. The ancient stones were preserved, and wherever modern masonry was used, it was cunningly worked in to look as time-worn as the Norman walls, while the lancet windows were filled with genuine old stained glass purchased by degrees from different parts of England, each fragment being properly authenticated. A groined roof, simple yet noble in outline, covered in the building; ornamented with delicately rounded mouldings alternated with

hollows so planned as to give the most forcible effects of light and shade according to the style of English Early Pointed work, and the only thing that was left incomplete was the pierced circular window above the chancel, which Walden sought to fill with stained glass of such indubitable antiquity and beauty of design that he was only able to secure it bit by bit at long intervals. While engaged in collecting this, he judged it best to fill the window with ordinary clear glass rather than put in inferior stuff. For the chancel appeared to demand special reverence, from the nature of a wonderful discovery made in it during the work of restoration,—a discovery which greatly helped to sustain and confirm the name of both church and village as 'St. Rest,' and to entirely disprove the frequently-offered suggestion that it could ever have been meant for 'St. East.' And this is how the discovery happened.

One never-to-be-forgotten morning when the workmen were hewing away at the floor of the chancel, one of their pickaxes came suddenly in contact with a hard substance which gave back a metallic echo when the blow of the implement came down upon it. Working with caution, and gradually clearing away a large quantity of loose stones, broken pieces of mosaic and earth, a curious iron handle was discovered attached to a large screw which was apparently embedded deep in the ground. Walden was at once informed of this strange 'find' and hastened to the spot to examine the mysterious object. He was not very long in determining its nature.

"This is some very ancient method of leverage," he said, turning round to the workmen with an excitement he could barely conceal; "There is something precious underneath in the ground,—something which can probably be raised by means of this handle and screw. Dig round it about a yard away from the centre,—loosen the earth gently—be very careful!"

They obeyed; and all that day Walden stood watching them at work, his mind divided between hope and fear, and

his spirit moved by the passionate exultation of the antiquary whose studies and researches are about to be rewarded with unexpected treasure. Towards sunset the men came upon a large oblong piece of what appeared to be alabaster, closely inlaid with pattens of worn gold and bearing on its surface the sculptured emblems of a cross, a drawn sword and a crown of laurel leaves intertwisted with thorns, the whole most elaborately wrought, and very little injured. As this slowly came to light, Walden summoned all hands to assist him in turning the great iron screw which now stood out upright, some three or four feet from the aperture they had been digging. Wondering at his 'fancy' as they termed it, they however had full reliance on his proved knowledge of what he was about, and under his guidance they all applied themselves to the quaint and cumbrous iron handle which had been the first thing discovered, and with considerable difficulty began to turn it round and round. As they proceeded laboriously in this task, while the screw creaked and groaned under the process with a noise as of splitting timber, all at once the oblong slab of alabaster moved, and rose upward about an inch.

"To it, boys!" cried Walden, his eyes sparkling; "To it again, and harder! We shall have it with us in an hour!"

And truly, in somewhat less than an hour the strange old-world lever had lifted what it must often have lifted in a similar way in bygone years,—a magnificent and perfectly preserved sarcophagus, measuring some six or seven feet long by three feet wide, covered with exquisite carving at the sides, representing roses among thorns, the flowers having evidently at one time been centred with gems and which even now bore traces of gold. Round the lid there was some dim lettering which was scarcely discernible,—the lid itself was firmly closed and strongly cemented.

Exclamations of wonder, admiration, and excitement broke from all who had been engaged in the work of excavation, and presently the whole village ran out to see the wonderful relic of a forgotten past, all chattering, all speculating, all staring.

Walden alone stood silent; his head bared,—his hands clasped. He knew that only some great saint or holy recluse could have ever been so royally enshrined in ancient days, and the elaborate system of leverage used seemed to prove that the body laid within that wrought alabaster and gold must have been considered to be of that peculiar nature termed 'miraculous,' and worthy to be lifted from its resting-place into the chancel on certain particular occasions for the homage and reverence of the people. The sun poured down upon the beautiful object lying there,—on the groups of workmen who, instinctively imitating Walden's example, had bared their heads,—on the wrinkled worn faces of old village men and women,—on the bright waving locks of young girls, and the clear enquiring eyes of children, all gazing at the strange treasure-trove their ruined church had given up to the light of a modern day. Presently the chief workman asked Walden in a hushed voice:

"Shall we break it open, sir?"

"No,—never!" replied Walden gently but firmly; "That would be sacrilege. We may not lightly disturb the dead! The ashes enshrined in this wonderful casket must be those of one who was dear to the old-time church. They shall rest in peace. And as this sarcophagus is evidently fixed by its leverage system exactly in the middle of the chancel, fronting the altar, we will let it remain there and occupy its own original place. The chancel could not have a grander ornament!"

And so, in the middle of the chancel, between the altar and the steps which separated that part of the church from the main body of the building, the mysterious undated relic lay under the warm light of the eastern window, and people who were interested in antiquities came from far and near to see it, though they could make no more of it than Walden himself had done. The cross and sword might possibly indicate martyrdom; the laurels and thorn fame. Certainly there were no signs that the dumb occupant of that sealed coffer was a monarch of merely earthly power and state. When the

alabaster came to be thoroughly cleansed and polished, part of the inscription could be deciphered in the following letters of worn gold:

Sancta . vixit . Sancta obit . .
In . cœlum . sanctorum . .
transmigravit . . .
In Resurrectione Sanctorum
resurget
M . Beatæ . ma . . R . .

But to what perished identity these significant words applied remained an impenetrable mystery. Every old record was carefully searched,—every scrap of ancient history wherein the neighbourhood of St. Rest had ever been concerned was turned over and over by the patient and indefatigable John Walden, who followed up many suggestive tracks eagerly and lost them again when apparently just on the point of finding some sure clue,—till at last he gave up the problem in despair and contented himself and his parishioners by accepting the evident fact that in the old church at one time or another some saint or holy abbot had been buried,—hence the name of St. Rest or 'The Saint's Rest,' which had become attached to the village. But at what exact period such saint or abbot had lived and died, was undiscoverable.

When the restoration of the sacred shrine was completed, and an expectant congregation filled it to overflowing to assist at the solemn service of its re-dedication to the worship of God, not one among them all but was deeply impressed by the appearance of the restored chancel, with its beautiful columns and delicate capitals, arching like a bower of protection over the altar, and over that wonderful white sarcophagus lying snow-like in the rays of the sun, which flashed clear on its stray bits of gold and broken incrustation of gems, sending a straight beam through the eastern window on the one word 'Resurget' like a torch of hope from beyond the grave.

Bishop Brent, Walden's old college friend, came to perform the ceremony of consecration, and this was the first time the inhabitants of St. Rest had seen a real Bishop for many years.

Much excitement did his presence create in that quiet woodland dell, the more especially as he proved to be a Bishop somewhat out of the common. Tall and attenuated in form, he had a face which might almost be called magnetic, so alive was its expression,—so intense and passionate was the light of the deep dark melancholy eyes that burned from under their shelving brows like lamps set in a high watch-tower of intellect. When he preached, his voice, with its deep mellow cadence, thrilled very strangely to the heart,—and every gesture, every turn of his head, expressed the activity of the keen soul pent up within his apparently frail body. The sermon he gave on the occasion of the re-dedication of the Church of St. Rest was powerful and emotional, but scarcely orthodox—and therefore was not altogether pleasing to Sir Morton Pippitt. He chose as his text: "Behold I show you a mystery; we shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed;" and on this he expatiated, setting forth the joys of the spiritual life as opposed to the physical,—insisting on the positive certainty of individual existence after death, and weaving into his discourse some remarks on the encoffined saint whose sarcophagus had been unearthed from its long-hidden burial-place and set again where it had originally stood, in the middle of the chancel. He spoke in hushed and solemn tones of the possibility of the holy spirit of that unknown one being present among them that day, helping them in their work, joining in their prayers of consecration and perhaps bestowing upon them additional blessing. At which statement, given with poetic earnestness and fervour, Sir Morton stared, breathed hard and murmured in his daughter's ear "A Roman! The man is a Roman!"

But notwithstanding Sir Morton Pippitt's distaste for the manner in which the Bishop dealt with his subject, and his numerous allusions to saints in heaven and their probable guardianship of their friends on earth, the sermon was a deeply impressive one, and lingered long in the memories of those who had heard it, softening their hearts, inspiring their souls, and awakening them to hopeful considerations of a happier end than the mere grave.

Ten years, however, had now passed since John Walden had bought the living, and of these ten years three had been occupied in the restoration of the church, so that seven had elapsed since it had been consecrated. And during those seven years not once had Bishop Brent been seen again in St. Rest. He remained in the thoughts of the people as an indefinable association with whom they would fain have had more to do. Sir Morton Pippitt had passed from the sixties into the seventies, very little altered;—still upright, still inflexible and obstinate of temperament, he ruled the neighbourhood, Riversford especially, as much as was possible to him now that much of the management of St. Rest had passed under the quieter, but no less firm authority of John Walden, whose will was nearly always found in intellectually balanced opposition to his. The two seldom met. Sir Morton was fond of 'county' society; Walden loathed it. Moreover, Miss Tabitha, wearing steadily on towards fifty, had, as the saying is, secretly 'set her cap' at the Reverend John; and the mere sight of the sedately-amorous spinster set his nerves on edge. Devoting himself strictly to his duties, to the care of the church, to the interests of his parishioners, young and old, to the cultivation of his garden, and to the careful preservation of all the natural beauties of the landscape around him,—John lived very much the life of a 'holy man' of mediæval days; while Sir Morton built and 'patronised' a hospital at Riversford, gave several prizes for cabbages and shooting competitions, occasionally patted the heads of a few straggling school-children, fussed round among his scattered tenantry, and wrote paragraphs about his own 'fine presence and open-hearted hospitality' for publication in the 'Riversford Gazette' whenever he entertained a house-party at Badsworth Hall, which he very frequently did. He kept well in touch with London folk, and to London folk he was fond of speaking of St. Rest as 'my' little village. But when London folk came to enquire for themselves as to the nature of his possession, they invariably discovered that it was not Sir Morton's little village at all but the Reverend John's little village. Hence arose certain dis-

crepancies, and cross-currents of feeling, leading to occasional mild friction and 'local' excitement. Up to the present time, however, Walden had on the whole lived a tranquil life, such as best suited his tranquil and philosophic temperament, and his occasional 'brushes' with Sir Morton only served to give piquancy and savour to the quiet round of his daily habits. Now, all unexpectedly, there was to be a break,—a new source of unavoidable annoyance in the intrusion of a feminine authority,—a modern Squire-ess, who no doubt would probably bring modern ways with her into the little old-world place,—who would hunt and shoot and smoke,—perhaps even swear at her grooms,—who could tell? She would not, she could not interfere with the church or its minister, were she ever so much Miss Vancourt of Abbot's Manor,—but she could if she liked 'muddle about' with many other matters, and there could be no doubt that as the visible and resident mistress of the most historic house in the neighbourhood, she would be what is called 'a social influence.'

"And not for good!" mused John Walden, during a meditative stroll in his garden on the even of the May-day on which he had heard the disturbing news; "Certainly not for good!"

He raised his eyes to the sky where the curved bow of a new moon hung clear and bright as a polished sickle. All was intensely still. The day had been a very busy one for him;—the children's dinner and their May-games had kept his hands full, and not till sunset, when the chimes of the church began to ring for evening service, had he been able to snatch a moment to himself for quiet contemplation. The dewy freshness of the garden, perfumed by the opening blossoms of the syringa, imparted its own sense of calm and grave repose to his mind,—and as he paced slowly up and down the gravel walk in front of his study window watching the placid beauty of the deepening night, a slight sigh escaped him.

"It cannot be for good!" he repeated, regretfully; "A woman trained as she must have been trained since girlhood, with all her finer perceptions blunted by perpetual contact with

the assertive and ostentatious evidences of an excess of wealth, —probably surrounded too by the pitiful vulgarisms of a half-bred American society, too ignorant to admit or recognise its own limitations,—she must have almost forgotten the stately traditions of the fine old family she springs from. One must not expect the motto of 'noblesse oblige' to weigh with modern young women—more's the pity! I'm afraid the mistress of Abbot's Manor will be a disturbing element in the village, breeding discontent and trouble where there has been till now comparative peace, and a fortunate simplicity of life. I'm sorry! This would have been a perfect First of May but for the news of her coming. It is the one cloud in an otherwise clear sky!"

The young moon swinging lazily downward to the west, looked upon him as though she smiled. A little bat scurried past in fear and hurled itself into the dewy masses of foliage bordering the edge of the lawn. And from the reeds and sedges fringing the river beyond, there came floating a long whispering murmur that swept past his ears and died softly into space, as of a voice that had something strange and new to say, which might not yet be said.

CHAPTER IV

TWO days later on, when Walden was at work in his own room seriously considering the points of his sermon for the coming Sunday, his 'head man about the place,' Bainton, made a sudden appearance on the lawn and abruptly halted there, looking intently up at the sky, as though taking observations of a comet at noon. This was a customary trick of his resorted to whenever he wished to intrude his presence during forbidden hours. John saw him plainly enough from where he sat busily writing, though for a few minutes he pretended not to see. But as Bainton remained immovable and apparently rooted to the ground, and as it was likely that there he would remain till positively told to go, his master made a virtue of necessity, and throwing down his pen, went to the window. Bainton thereupon advanced a little, but stopped again as though irresolute. Walden likewise paused a moment, then at last driven to bay by the old gardener's pertinacity, stepped out.

"Now what is it, Bainton?" he said, endeavouring to throw a shade of sternness into his voice; "You know very well I hate being disturbed while I'm writing."

Bainton touched his cap respectfully.

"Now don't go for to say as I'm disturbing on ye, Passon," he remonstrated, mildly; "I ain't said a mortal wurrd! I was onny jes' keepin' my eye on the clap gate yonder, in case the party in the churchyard might walk through, thinkin' it a right-o'-way. Them swagger folk ain't got no sort of idee as to respectin' private grounds."

Walden's eyes flashed.

"A party in the churchyard?" he repeated. "Who are they?"

"Who should they be?" And Bainton's rugged features expressed a sedate mingling of the shrewd and the contemptuous that was quite amazing. "Worn't you expectin' distinguished visitors some day this week, sir?"

"I know!" exclaimed Walden quickly; "Sir Morton Pippitt and his guests have come to 'inspect' the church! Ha-ha-ha-ha!" And he broke into a laugh so joyous and mellow that Bainton found it quite irresistible and joined in it with a deep "Hor-hor-hor!" evoked from the hollow of his throat, and beginning loudly, but dying away into a hoarse intermittent chuckle.

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed the Reverend John again, throwing back his head with a real enjoyment in his capability for laughter; "You did quite right to disturb me, Bainton,—quite right! Where are Sir Morton and his party? What are they doing?"

"They was jes' crossin' the churchyard when I spied 'em," answered Bainton; "An' Sir Morton was makin' some very speshul observations of his own on the 'herly Norman period.' Hor-hor-hor! An' they've got ole Putty Leveson with 'em——"

"Bainton!" interrupted Walden severely; "How often must I tell you that you should not speak of the rector of Badsworth in that disrespectful manner?"

"Very sorry, sir!" said Bainton complacently; "But if one of the names of a man 'appens to be Putwood an' the man 'imself is as fat as a pig scored for roastin' 'ole, what more nat'ral than the pet name of 'Putty' for 'im? No 'arm meant, I'm sure, Passon!—Putty's as good as Pippitt any day!"

Walden suppressed his laughter with an effort. He was very much of a boy at heart, despite his forty odd years, and the quaint obstinacies of his gardener amused him too much to call for any serious remonstrance. Turning back to his study he took his hat and cane from their own particular corner of

the room and started for the little clap gate which Bainton had been, as he said, 'keeping his eye on.'

"No more work to-day," he said, with an air of whimsical resignation; "But I may possibly get one or two hints for my sermon!"

He strode off, and Bainton watched him go. As the clap gate opened and swung to again, and his straight athletic figure disappeared, the old gardener still stood for a moment or two ruminating.

"What a blessin' he ain't married!" he said thoughtfully; "A blessin' to the village, an' a blessin' to 'imself! He'd a bin a fine man spoilt, if a woman 'ad ever got 'old on 'im,—a fine man spoilt, jes' like me!"

An appreciative grin at his own expense spread among the furrows of his face at this consideration;—then he trotted slowly off towards the vegetable garden where his 'under gardeners' as he called three or four sturdy village lads employed to dig and hoe, constantly required his supervision.

Meanwhile Walden, leaving his own grounds, entered the churchyard, walking with softly reverent step among the little green mounds of earth, under which kind eyes were closed, and warm hearts lay cold, till, reaching the porched entrance of the church itself, he paused, brought to a halt by the sound of voices which were pitched rather too loud for propriety, considering the sacredness of the surroundings.

"That eastern window is crude—very crude!" said a growlingly robust baritone; "I suppose the reverend gentleman could not secure sufficient subscriptions to meet the expense of suitable stained glass?"

"Unfortunately Mr. Walden is a very self-opinionated man," replied a smooth and oily tenor, whose particular tone of speech Walden recognised as that of the Reverend 'Putty' Leveson, the minister of Badsworth, a small scattered village some five or six miles 'on the wrong side of Badsworth Hall,' as the locality was called, owing to its removed position from the county town of Riversford. "He would not accept outside

advice. Of course these columns and capitals are all wrong, —they are quite incongruous with early Norman walls,—but when ignorance is allowed to have its own way, the effect is always disastrous."

"Always—always,—my dear sir—always!" And the voice of Sir Morton Pippitt, high pitched and resonant, trolled out on the peaceful air; "The fact is, the church could have been much better done, had I been consulted! The whole thing was carried out in the most brazen manner, under my very nose, sir, under my very nose!—without so much as a 'by your leave'! Shocking, shocking! I complained to the Bishop, but it was no use, for it seems that he has a perfect infatuation for this man Walden—they were college friends or something of that kind. As for the sarcophagus here, of course it ought in the merest common decency to have been transferred to the Cathedral of the diocese. But you see the present incumbent bought the place;—the purchase of advowsons is a scandal, in my opinion—however this man got it all his own way, more's the pity!—he bought it through some friend or other—and so——"

"So he could do as he liked with it;" said a mild, piping falsetto; "And so far, he has made it beau-ti-ful!—beau-ti-ful!"

There was a pause, during which Walden, baring his head as he passed in, entered the sacred edifice. He became aware of Sir Morton Pippitt standing in the attitude of a University Extension lecturer near the sarcophagus in the middle of the chancel, with the Reverend Mr. Leveson and a couple of other men near him, while two more strangers were studying the groined roof with critical curiosity. As he approached, Sir Morton made a rapid sign to his companions and stepped down from the chancel.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Walden," he said in a loud whisper, and with an elaborate affectation of great heartiness; "I have brought His Grace the Duke of Lumpton to see the church."

Walden allowed his calm blue eyes to rest quietly on His Grace the Duke of Lumpton without much interest. His Grace was an undersized fat man, with a bald head and a red

face, and on Walden's being presented to him, merely nodded with a patronisingly casual air.

"Lord Mawdenham,"—continued Sir Morton, swelling visibly with just pride at his own good fortune in being able to introduce a Lord immediately after a Duke, and offering Walden, as it were, with an expressive wave of his hand, to a pale young gentleman, who seemed seriously troubled by an excess of pimples on his chin, and who plucked nervously at one of these undesirable facial addenda as his name was uttered. Walden acknowledged his presence with silent composure, as he did the wide smile and familiar nod of his brother minister, the Reverend 'Putty,' whose truly elephantine proportions were encased in a somewhat too closely fitting bicycle suit, and whose grand-pianoforte shaped legs and red perspiring face together, presented a most unclerical spectacle of the 'Church at large.'

The two gentlemen who had been studying the groined roof, now brought their glances to bear on Walden, and one of them, a youngish man with a crop of thick red hair and a curiously thin, hungry face, spoke without waiting for Sir Morton's cue.

"Mr. Walden? Ye-es!—I felt sure it must be Mr. Walden! Let me congratulate you, sir, on your exquisite devotional work here! The church is beau-ti-ful—beau-ti-ful! A sonnet in stone! A sculptured prayer! Ye-es! It is so! Permit me to press your hand!"

John smiled involuntarily. There was a quaint affectation about the speaker that was quite irresistibly entertaining.

"Mr. Julian Adderley is a poet," said Sir Morton, whispering this in a jocose stage aside; "Everything is 'beautiful' to him!"

Mr. Julian Adderley smiled faintly, and fixed a pair of rather fine grey eyes on Walden with a mute appeal, as one who should say with Hamlet 'These tedious old fools!' Meanwhile Sir Morton Pippitt had secured the last member of his party affectionately by the arm, and continuing his stage whisper said:

"Permit me, Mr. Walden! This is one of our greatest London literary lights! He will particularly appreciate anything you may be good enough to tell him respecting your work of restoration here—Mr. Marius Longford, of the Savile and Savage clubs!"

Mr. Marius Longford, of the Savile and Savage clubs, bent his head with an air of dignified tolerance. He was an angular personage, with a narrow head, and a face cleanly shaven, except at the sides where two small pussy-cat whiskers fringed his sharply defined jaws. He had a long thin mouth, and long thin slits for his eyes to peep through,—they would have been eyelids with other people, but with him they were merely slits. He was a particularly neat man in appearance—his clothes were well brushed, his linen spotless, his iron-grey hair sleek, and his whole appearance that of a man well satisfied with his own exterior personality. Walden glanced at this great London literary light as indifferently as he would have glanced at an incandescent lamp in the street, or other mechanical luminary. He had not as yet spoken a word. Sir Morton had done all the talking; but the power of silence always overcomes in the end, and John's absolute non-committal of himself to any speech, had at last the effect he desired—namely that of making Sir Morton appear a mere garrulous old interloper, and his 'distinguished' friends somewhat of the cheap tripper persuasion. The warm May sun poured through the little shrine of prayer, casting flickers of gold and silver on the 'Saint at Rest' before the altar, and showering azure and rose patterns through the ancient stained glass which filled the side lancet windows. The stillness became for the moment intense and almost oppressive,—Sir Morton Pippitt fidgeted uneasily, pulled at his high starched collar and became red in the face,—the Reverend 'Putty' forgot himself so far as to pinch one of his own legs and hum a little tune, while the rest of the party waited for the individual whom their host had so frequently called 'the damned parson' to speak. The tension was relieved by the sudden quiet entrance of a young woman carrying a roll of music. Seeing

the group of persons in the chancel, she paused in evident uncertainty. Walden glanced at her, and his composed face all at once lighted up with that kindly smile which in such moments made him more than ordinarily handsome.

"Come along, Miss Eden," he said in a low clear tone; "You are quite at liberty to practise as usual. Sir Morton Pippitt and his friends will not disturb you."

Miss Eden smiled sedately and bent her head, passing by the visitors with an easy demeanour and assured step, and made her way to where the organ, small, but sweet and powerful, occupied a corner near the chancel. While she busied herself in opening the instrument and arranging her music, Walden took advantage of the diversion created by her entrance to address himself to the knight Pippitt.

"If I can be of service to your friends in explaining anything about the church they may wish to know, pray command me, Sir Morton," he said. "But I presume that you and Mr. Leveson"—here he glanced at the portly 'Putty' with a slight smile—"have pointed out all that is necessary."

"On the contrary!" said Mr. Marius Longford 'of the Savile and Savage,' with a smoothly tolerant air; "We are really quite in the dark! Do we understand, for example, that the restoration of this church is entirely due to your generosity, or to assistance from public funds and subscriptions?"

"The restoration is due, not to my 'generosity,'" replied Walden, "but merely to my sense of what is fitting for Divine service. I have had no assistance from any fund or from any individual, because I have not sought it."

There was a pause, during which Mr. Longford fixed a pair of gold-rimmed glasses on his nose and gazed quizzically through them at Sir Morton Pippitt, whose countenance had grown uncomfortably purple in hue either with exterior heat or inward vexation.

"I thought, Sir Morton," he began slowly, when Mr. Leveson adroitly interrupted him by the query:

"Now what period would you fix, Mr. Longford, for this

sarcophagus? I am myself inclined to think it of the fourteenth century."

A soft low strain of music here crept through the church,—the village schoolmistress was beginning her practice. She had a delicate touch, and the sounds her fingers pressed from the organ-keys were full, and solemn and sweet. His Grace the Duke of Lumpton coughed loudly; he hated music, and always made some animal noise of his own to drown it.

"What matters the period!" murmured Julian Adderley, running his thin hand through his thick hair. "Is it not sufficient to see it here among us, with us, *of* us?"

"God bless my soul! I hope it is not *of* us!" spluttered Sir Morton with a kind of fat chuckle which seemed to emanate from his stiff collar rather than from his throat; "'Ashes to ashes' of course; we are all aware of that—but not just yet! —not just yet!"

"I am unable to fix the period satisfactorily to my own mind," said Walden, quietly ignoring both Sir Morton and his observations on the Beyond; "though I have gone through considerable research with respect to the matter. So I do not volunteer any opinion. There is, however, no doubt that at one time the body contained in that coffer must have been of the nature termed by the old Church 'miraculous.' That is to say, it must have been supposed to be efficacious in times of plague or famine, for there are several portions of the alabaster which have evidently been worn away by the frequent pressure or touch of hands on the surface. Probably in days when this neighbourhood was visited by infection, drought, floods or other troubles, the priests raised the coffin by the system of leverage which we discovered when excavating, (and which is still in working order) and allowed the people to pass by and lay their hands upon it with a special prayer to be relieved of their immediate sickness or sorrow. There were many such 'miraculous' shrines in the early part of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries."

"Exactly," said Mr. Longford; "I imagine you may be right,

Mr. Walden; it is evidently a relic of the very earliest phases of the Christian myth."

As he spoke the last words Walden looked straightly at him. A fine smile hovered on his lips.

"It is as you say," he rejoined calmly—"It is a visible token of the time when men believed in an Unseen Force more potent than themselves."

The Duke of Lumpton coughed noisily again, and his friend, Lord Mawdenham, who up to the present had occupied the time in staring vaguely about him and anxiously feeling his pimples, said hurriedly:

"Oh, look here, Sir Morton—er—I say,—er—hadn't we better be going? There's Lady Elizabeth Messing coming to lunch and you know she can't bear to be kept waiting—never do, you know, not to be there to see her when she arrives—he-he-he! We should never get over it in London or out of London—'pon my life!—I do assure you!"

Sir Morton's chest swelled;—his starched collar crackled round his expanding throat, and his voice became richly resonant as under the influential suggestion of another 'titled' personage he replied:

"Indeed, you are right, my dear Lord Mawdenham! To keep Lady Elizabeth waiting would be an unpardonable offence against all the proprieties! Hum—ha—er—yes!—against all the proprieties! Mr. Walden, we must go! Lady Elizabeth Messing is coming to lunch with us at Badsworth. You have no doubt heard of her—eldest daughter of the Earl of Charrington!—yes, we must really be going! I think I may say, may I not, your Grace?"—here he bent towards the ducal Lumpton—"that we are all highly pleased with the way in which Mr. Walden has effected the restoration of the church?"

"Oh, I don't know anything at all about it!" replied His Grace, with the air of a sporting groom; "I've no taste at all in churches, and I'm not taking any on old coffins! It's a nice little chapel—just enough for a small village I should say. After all, don't-cher-know, you only want very little accommo-

dation for a couple of hundred yokels; and whether it's old or new architecture doesn't matter to 'em a brass farthing!"

These observations were made with a rambling air of vague self-assertiveness which the speaker evidently fancied would pass for wit and wisdom. Walden said nothing. His brow was placid, and his countenance altogether peaceful. He was listening to the solemnly sweet flow of a Bach prelude which Miss Eden was skilfully unravelling on the organ, the notes rising and falling, and anon soaring up again like prayerful words striving to carry themselves to heaven.

"I think," said Mr. Marius Longford weightily, "that whatever fault the building may have from a strictly accurate point of view,—which is a matter I am not prepared to go into without considerable time given for due study and consideration,—it is certainly the most attractive edifice of its kind that I have seen for some time. It reflects great credit on you, Mr. Walden;—no doubt the work gave you much personal pleasure?"

"It certainly did so," replied John,—"and I'm afraid I am arrogant enough to be satisfied with the general result so far as it goes,—with the exception of the eastern window, of course!"

"Ah, that eastern window!" sighed the Reverend 'Putty' with an air of æsthetic languor which was in comical contrast with his coarse and commonplace appearance; "That is a sad, sad flaw! A terrible incongruity!"

"I made up my mind from the first," pursued Walden, his equable voice seeming to float pleasantly on the tide of music with which the little sanctuary was just then filled; "that nothing but the most genuine and authentic old stained glass should fill that fine circular rose carving, and those lance apertures; so I am collecting it slowly, bit by bit, for this purpose. It will take time and patience, no doubt,—but I think and hope that success will be the end of the task I have set myself. In the meantime, of course, the effect of plain glass where there should be only the richest colouring is decidedly 'crude'!"

He smiled slightly, and there was an uncomfortable pause. Sir Morton Pippitt took out a voluminous red handkerchief covered with yellow spots and blew his nose violently therein while the Reverend Mr. Leveson nodded his large head blandly, as one who receives doubtful information with kindly tolerance. Mr. Marius Longford looked faintly amused.

"I understand!" said the light of the Savile and Savage,' slowly; "You seek perfection!"

He smiled a pallid smile; but on the whole surveyed Walden with more interest than he had hitherto done. Julian Adderley, who had during the last couple of minutes stepped up to the chancel, now stood gazing at the sarcophagus of the supposed Saint with a kind of melancholy interest. Reading the only legible words of the inscription in sotto voce, he sighed drearily.

"'In — Resurrectione — Sanctorum — Resurget!' How simple!—how new!—how fresh! To think that anyone ever held such a child's faith!"

"The Church is still supposed to hold it," said Walden steadily, "And her ministers also. Otherwise, religion is a farce, and its professors much less honest than the trusted servant who steals his master's money!"

Marius Longford smiled, and stroked one feline whisker thoughtfully.

"So you actually believe what you preach!" he murmured—"Strange! You are more of an antiquity than the consecrated dust enclosed in that alabaster! Believe me!"

"Much more,—much more!" exclaimed the fantastic Adderley; "To believe in anything at all is so remote!—so very remote!—and yet so new—so fresh!"

Walden made no reply. He never argued on religious matters; moreover, with persons minded in the manner of those before him, it seemed useless to even offer an opinion. They exchanged meaning glances with each other, and followed Sir Morton, who was now moving down the central aisle of the church towards the door of exit, holding the Duke of Lumpton familiarly by the arm, and accompanied by Lord

Mawdenham. Walden walked silently with them, till, passing out of the church, they all stood in a group on the broad gravelled pathway which led to the open road, where the Pippitt equipage, a large waggonette and pair, stood waiting, together with a bicycle, the property of the Reverend Mr. Leveson.

"Thank you, Mr. Walden!" then said Sir Morton Pippitt with a grandiose air, as of one who graciously confers a benefit on the silence by breaking it; "Thank you for—er—for—er—the pleasure of your company this—er—this morning! My friend, the Duke,—and Lord Mawdenham—and—er—our rising poet, Mr. Adderley—and—er—Mr. Longford, have been delighted. Yes—er—delighted! Of course you know *my* opinion! Ha-ha-ha! You know *my* opinion! It is the same as it ever was—I never change! When *I* have once made up my mind, it is a fixture! I have said already and I say it again, that the church was quite good enough for such people as live here, in its original condition, and that you have really spent a great deal of cash on a very needless work! I mustn't be rude, no, no, no!—but you know the old adage: 'Fools and their money!' Ha-ha-ha! But we sha'n't quarrel. Oh, dear no! It has cost *me* nothing, I am glad to say! Ha-ha! Nor anybody else! Now, if Miss Vancourt of Abbot's Manor had been here when you began this restoration business of yours, *she* might have had something to say—ha-ha-ha! She always has something to say!"

"You think she would have objected?" queried Walden, coldly.

"Oh, I won't go so far as that——no!—eh, your Grace?—we won't go so far as that!"

The Duke of Lumpton, thus suddenly adjured, looked round, and smiled vacantly.

"Won't go so far as what?" he asked; "Didn't catch it!"

"I was talking of Maryllia Vancourt," said Sir Morton with a kind of fatuous leer; "*You* know her, of course!—everyone knows her more or less. Charming girl!—charming! Maryllia Van!—ha-ha!"

And Sir Morton laughed and leered again till certain veins, moved by cerebral emotion, protruded largely on his forehead. His Grace laughed also, but shortly and indifferently.

"Oh, ya-as — ya-as! She's the one who's just had a rumpus with her rich American aunt. I believe they don't speak. After years of devotion, eh? So like women, ain't it!"

The Reverend 'Putty' Leveson, who had been stooping over his bicycle to set something right that was invariably going wrong with that particular machine, and who was redder than ever in the face with his efforts, now looked up.

"Miss Vancourt is coming back to the Manor to reside there, so I hear," he said. "Very dull for a woman accustomed to London and Paris. I expect she'll stay about ten days."

"One never knows — one cannot tell!" sighed Julian Adderley. "Sometimes to the satiated female mind, overwrought with social dissipation, there comes a strange longing for peace!—for the scent of roses!—for the yellow shine of cowslips!—for the song of the mating birds!—for the breath of cows!"

Mr. Marius Longford smiled, and picked a tall buttercup nodding in the grass at his feet.

"Such aspirations in the fair sex are absolutely harmless," he said; "Let us hope the lady's wishes may find their limit in a soothing pastoral!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Sir Morton. "You are deep, my dear sir, you are very deep! God bless my soul! Deep as a well! No wonder people are afraid of you! Clever, clever! I'm afraid of you myself! Come along, come along! Can I assist your Grace?" Here he pushed aside with a smothered 'Damn!' the footman, who stood holding open the door of the waggonette, and officiously gave the Duke of Lumpton a hand to help him into the carriage. "Now, Lord Mawdenham, please! You next, Mr. Longford! Come, come, Mr. Adderley! Think of Lady Elizabeth! She will be arriving at the Hall before we are there to receive her! Terrible, terrible! Come along! We're all ready!"

Julian Adderley had turned to Walden.

"Permit me to call and see you alone!" he said. "I cannot just now appreciate the poetry of your work in the church as I should do—as I ought to do—as I must do! The present company is discordant!—one requires the music of Nature,—the thoughts,—the dreams! But no more at present! I should like to talk with you on many matters some wild sweet morning,—if you have no objection?"

Walden was amused. At the same time he was not very eager to respond to this overture of closer acquaintanceship with one who, by his dress, manner and method of speech, proclaimed himself a 'decadent' of the modern school of ethics; but he was nothing if not courteous. So he replied briefly:

"I shall be pleased to see you, of course, Mr. Adderley, but I must warn you that I am a very busy man—I should not be able to give you much time——"

"No explanations—I understand!" And Adderley pressed his hand with enthusiasm. "The very fact that you are busy in a village like this adds to the peculiar charm of your personality! It is so strange!—so new—so fresh!"

He smiled, and again pressed hands.

"Good-bye! The mood will send me to you at the fitting moment!"

He clapped his hat more firmly on his redundant red locks and clambered into the waiting waggonette. Sir Morton followed him, and the footman shut to the door of the vehicle with a bang as unnecessary as his master's previous 'Damn!'

"Good-morning, Mr. Walden!" then shouted the knight of bone-melting prowess; "Much obliged to you, I'm sure!"

Walden raised his hat with brief ceremoniousness, and then as the carriage rolled away addressed the Reverend Mr. Leveson, who was throwing himself with hippopotamus-like agility across his bicycle.

"You follow, I suppose?"

"Yes. I'm lunching at Badsworth Hall. The Duke wants

to consult me about his family records. You know I'm a bit of an authority on such points!"

Walden smiled.

"I believe you are! But mind you calendar the ducal deeds carefully," he said. "A slip in the lineal descent of the Lumptons might affect the whole prestige of the British Empire!"

A light shone in his clear blue eyes,—a flashing spark of battle. Leveson stayed his bicycle a moment, wobbling on it uneasily.

"Lumpton goes back a good way," he said airily; "I shall take him up when I have gone through the history of the Vancourts. I'm on that scent now. I shall make a good bit of business directly Miss Vancourt returns; she'll pay for anything that will help her to stiffen her back and put more side on."

"Really!" ejaculated Walden, coldly; "I should have thought her forebears would have saved her from snobbery."

"Not a bit of it!" declared Leveson, beginning to start the muscles of his grand-pianoforte legs with energy; "Rapid as a firework, and vain as a peacock! Ta!"

And fixing a small cap firmly on the back of his very large head, he worked his wheel with treadmill regularity and was soon out of sight.

Walden stood alone in the churchyard, lost for a brief space in meditation. The solemn strains of the organ which the schoolmistress was still playing, floated softly out from the church to the perfumed air, and the grave melodious murmur made an undercurrent of harmony to the clear bright warbling of a skylark, which, beating its wings against the sunbeams, rose ever higher and higher above him.

"What petty souls we are!" he murmured; "Here am I feeling actually indignant because this fellow Leveson, who has less education and knowledge than my dog Nebbie, assumes to have some acquaintance with Miss Vancourt! What does it matter? What business is it of mine? If she cares to accept information from an ignoramus, what is it to do with

me? Nothing! Yet,—what a blatant ass the fellow is! Upon my word, it does me good to say it—a blatant ass! And Sir Morton Pippitt is another!"

He laughed, and lifting his hat from his forehead let the soft wind breathe refreshing coolness on his uncovered hair.

"There are decided limits to Christian love!" he said, the laughter still dancing in his eyes. "I defy—I positively defy anyone to love Leveson! 'The columns and capitals are all wrong' are they?" And he gave a glance back at the beautiful little church in its exquisite design and completed perfection. "'Out of keeping with early Norman walls!' Wise Leveson! He ignores all periods of transition as if they had never existed—as if they had no meaning for the thinker as well as the architect—as if the movement upward from the Norman to the Early Pointed style showed no indication of progress! And whereas a church should always be a veritable 'sermon in stone' expressive of the various generations that have wrought their best on it, he limits himself to the beginning of things! I wonder what Leveson was in the beginning of things? Possibly an embryo Megatherium!"

Broadly smiling, he walked to the gate communicating with his own garden, opened it, and passed through. Nebbie was waiting for him on the lawn, and greeted him with the usual effusiveness. He returned to his desk, and to the composition of his sermon, but his thoughts were inclined to wander. Sir Morton Pippitt, the Duke of Lumpton and Lord Mawdenham, hovered before him like three dull puppets in a cheap show; and he was inclined to look up the name of Marius Longford in one of the handy guides to contemporary biography, in order to see if that flaccid and fish-like personage had really done anything in the world to merit his position as a shining luminary of the 'Savage and Savile.' Accustomed as he was to watch the ebb and flow of modern literature, he had not yet sighted either the Longford straw or the Adderley cork, among the flotsam and jetsam of that murky tide. And ever and again Sir Morton Pippitt's coarse chuckle, combined with the covert smiles of Sir Morton's 'distinguished' friends,

echoed through his mind in connection with the approaching dreaded invasion of Miss Vancourt into the happy quietude of the village of St. Rest, till he experienced a sense of pain and aversion almost amounting to anger. Why, he asked himself, seeing she had stayed so long away from her childhood's home, could she not have stayed away altogether? The swift and brilliant life of London was surely far more suited to one who, according to 'Putty' Leveson, was 'rapid as a firework, and vain as a peacock.' But was 'Putty' Leveson always celebrated for accuracy in his statements? No! Certainly not—yet——

Then something seemed to fire him with a sudden resolution, for he erased the first lines of the sermon he had begun, and altered his text, which had been: "Glory, honour and peace to every man that worketh good." And in its place he chose, as a more enticing subject of discourse:

"The ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God, of great price."

CHAPTER V

THE warm bright weather continued. Morning after morning dawned in unclouded sunshine, and when Saturday concluded the first five days of the 'May-moneth,' the inhabitants of St. Rest were disposed to concede that it was just possible they might have what they called 'a spell of fair weather.' Saturday was the general 'cleaning-up day' in the village—the day when pails of water were set out in unexpected places for the unwary to trip over; when the old flagstones poured with soapsuds that trickled over the toes of too-hasty passers-by; when cottage windows were violently squirted at with the aid of garden-syringes and hose,—and when Adam Frost, the sexton, was always to be found meditating, and even surreptitiously drinking beer, in a quiet corner of the churchyard, because he was afraid to go home, owing to the persistent housewifely energy of his better half, who 'washed down' everything, 'cleaned out' everything, and had, as she forcibly expressed it, 'the Sunday meals on her mind.' It was a day, too, when Bainton, released from his gardening duties at the rectory at noon, took a thoughtful stroll by himself, aware that his 'Missis' was scrubbing the kitchen, and 'wouldn't have him muckin' about,'—and when John Walden, having finished his notes for the Sunday's sermon, felt a sense of ease and relief, and considered himself at liberty to study purely Pagan literature, such as The Cratylus of Plato. But on this special Saturday he was not destined to enjoy complete relaxation. Mrs. Spruce had sent an urgent appeal to him to 'kindly step up to the Manor in the afternoon.'

And Mrs. Spruce's husband, a large, lumbering, simple-faced old fellow, in a brown jacket and corduroys, had himself come with the message, and having delivered it, stood on Walden's threshold, cap in hand, waiting for a reply. John surveyed his awkward, peasant-like figure with a sense of helplessness,—excuses and explanations he knew would be utterly lost on an almost deaf man. Submitting to fate, he nodded his head vigorously, and spoke as loudly as he judged needful.

"All right, Spruce! Say I'll come!"

"Jes' what I told her, sir," answered Spruce, in a remarkably gentle tone; "It's a bit okkard, but if she doos her dooty, no 'arm can 'appen, no matter if it's all the riches of the yearth."

John felt more helpless than ever. What was the man talking about? He drew closer and spoke in a more emphatic key.

"Look here, Spruce! Tell your wife I'll come after luncheon. Do you hear? Af—ter lun—cheon!"

Spruce put one hand to his ear and smiled blandly.

"Ezackly, sir! I quite agrees with ye; but women are allus a bit worrity-like, and of course there's a deal to do, and she got frightened with the keys, and when she saw them fine clothes and what not,—so I drawed her a glass of cherry-cordial, an' sez I 'Now, old 'ooman,' sez I, 'don't skeer yerself into fits. I'll fetch the passon to ye.' And with that, she seemed easier in her mind. Lord love ye!—it's a great thing to fetch the passon at once when there's anything a bit wrong. So, if you'd step up, sir?——"

Driven almost to despair, Walden put his lips close to the old man's obstinate ear.

"Yes," he bellowed—"af—ter lun—cheon! Yes! Ye—es!"

His reply at last penetrated the closed auricular doors of Spruce's brain.

"Thank you, kindly, sir, I'm sure," he said, still in the same meek and quiet tone. "And if I might make so bold, sir, seein' there's likely to be changes up at the Manor, if it should be needful to speak for me and my old 'ooman, p'raps you'd

be so good, sir? We wouldn't like to leave the old place now, sir——"

His soft, hesitating voice faltered, and he suddenly brushed his hand across his poor dim eyes. The pathos of this hint was not lost on Walden, who, forgetting all his own momentary irritation, rose manfully to the occasion and roared down the old man's ears like one of the far-famed 'Bulls of Bashan.'

"Don't worry!" he yelled, his face becoming rapidly crimson with his efforts; "I'll see you all right! You sha'n't leave the Manor if I can prevent it! I'll speak for you! Cheer up! Do you hear! Che—er up!"

Spruce heard very clearly this time, and smiled.

"Thank you, Passon! God bless you! I'm sure you'll help us, if so be the lady is a hard one——"

He trusted himself to say no more, but with a brief respectful salutation, put on his cap and turned away.

Left alone, Walden drew a long breath, and wiped his brow. To make poor old Spruce hear was a powerful muscular exertion. Nebbie had been so much astonished at the loud pitch of his master's voice, that he had retired under a sofa in alarm, and only crawled out now as Spruce departed, with small anxious waggings of his tail. Walden patted the animal's head and laughed.

"Mind you don't get deaf in your old age, Nebbie!" he said. "Phew! A little more shouting like that and I should be unable to preach to-morrow!"

Still patting the dog's head, his eyes gradually darkened and his brow became clouded.

"Poor Spruce!" he murmured. "'Help him, if so be the lady is a hard one!' Already in fear of her! I expect they have heard something—some ill-report—probably only too correctly founded. Yet, how it goes against the grain of manhood to realise that any 'lady' may be 'a hard one!' But, alas!—what a multitude of 'hard ones' there are! Harder than men, perhaps, if all the truth were known!"

And there was a certain sternness and rooted aversion in him to that dim approaching presence of the unknown heiress

of Abbot's Manor. He experienced an instinctive dislike of her, and was positively certain that the vague repugnance would deepen into actual antipathy.

"One cannot possibly like everybody," he argued within himself, in extenuation of what he felt was an unreasonable mental attitude; "And modern fashionable women are among the most unlikeable of all human creatures. Any one of them in such a village as this would be absurdly out of place."

Thus self-persuaded, his mood was a singular mixture of pity and resentment when, in fulfilment of his promise, he walked that afternoon up the winding road which led to the Manor, and avoiding the lodge gates, passed through a rustic turnstile he knew well and so along a path across meadows and through shrubberies to the house. The path was guarded by a sentinel board marked 'Private. Trespassers will be prosecuted.' But in all the years he had lived at St. Rest, he cared nothing for that. As rector of the parish he had his little privileges. Nebbie trotted at his heels with the air of a dog accustomed to very familiar surroundings. The grass on either side was springing up long and green,—delicate little field flowers were peeping through it here and there, and every now and then there floated upwards the strong sweet incense of the young wild thyme. The way he had chosen to walk was known as a 'short cut' to Abbot's Manor, and ten minutes of easy striding brought him into the dewy coolness of a thicket of dark firs, at the end of which, round a sharp turn, the fine old red brick and timbered gables of the house came into full view. He paused a moment, looking somewhat regretfully at the picture, warmly lit up by the glow of the bright sun,—a picture which through long habitude of observation had grown very sweet to him. It was not every day that such a house as Abbot's Manor came within reach of the archæologist and antiquarian. The beautiful tiled-roof—the picturesque roughness and crookedness of the architectural lines of the whole building, so different to the smooth, hard, angular imitations of half-timbered work common in these degenerate

days, were a delight to the eyes to rest upon,—a wealth of ivy clung thickly to the walls and clambered round the quaint old chimneys;—some white doves clustered in a group on the summit of one broad oak gable, were spreading their snowy wings to the warm sun and discussing their domestic concerns in melodious cooings;—the latticed windows, some of which in their unspoilt antiquity of 'horn' panes were a particular feature of the house, were all thrown open,—but to Walden's sensitive observation there seemed a different atmosphere about the place,—a suggestion of change and occupation which was almost startling.

He paced slowly on, and arrived at the outside gate, which led into a square old-fashioned court, such as was common to Tudor times, paved on three sides and planted with formal beds of flowers, the whole surrounded by an ancient wall. The gate was ajar, and pushing it open he passed in, glancing for a moment at the grey weather-beaten sun-dial in the middle of the court which told him it was three o'clock. For four centuries, at least, that self-same dial had marked the hour in that self-same spot, a silent commentary on the briefness of human existence, as compared with its own strange non-sentient lastingness. The sound of Walden's footsteps on the old paving-stones awoke faint echoes, and startled away a robin from a spray of blossoming briar-rose, and as he walked up to the great oaken porch of entrance,—a porch heavily carved with the Vaignecourt or Vancourt emblems, and as deep and wide in its interior as a small room, an odd sense came over him that he was no longer an accustomed visitor to a beautiful 'show house,' so much as a kind of trespasser on forbidden ground. The thick nail-studded doors, clamped with huge bolts and bars, stood wide open; no servant was on the threshold to bid him enter, and for a moment he hesitated, uncertain whether to ring the bell, or to turn back and go away, when suddenly Mrs. Spruce emerged from a shadowy corner leading to the basement, and hailed his appearance with an exclamation of evident relief.

"Thank the Lord and His goodness, Passon Walden, here you are at last! I'd made up my mind the silly fool of a

Spruce had brought me the wrong message;—a good meanin' man, but weak in the upper storey, 'cept where trees is concerned and clearing away brushwood, when I'd be bold to say he's as handy as they make 'em—but do, for mercy's sake, Passon, step inside and see how we've got on, for it's not so bad as it might have been, an' I've seen worse done at a few days' notice than even myself with hired hands on a suddint could ever do. Step in, sir, step in!—we're leavin' the door open to let the sun in a bit to warm the hall, for the old stained glass do but filter it through at its best; not but that we ain't had a fire in it night and mornin' ever since we had Miss Vancourt's letter."

Walden made no attempt to stem the flow of the worthy woman's discourse. From old experience, he knew that to be an impossible task. So he stepped in as he was bidden, and looked round the grand old hall, decorated with ancient armour, frayed banners and worn scutcheons, feeling regretfully that perhaps he was looking at it so for the last time. No one more than he had appreciated the simple dignity of its old-world style, or had more correctly estimated the priceless value of the antique oak panelling that covered its walls. He loved the great ingle-nook, set deep back as it were, in the very bosom of the house, with its high and elaborately carved benches on each side, and its massive armorial emblems wrought in black oak, picked out with tarnished gold, crimson and azure,—he appreciated every small gleam and narrow shaft of colour reflected by the strong sun through the deeply-tinted lozenge panes of glass that filled the lofty oriel windows on either side;—and the stuffed knight-in-armour, a model figure 'clad in complete steel,' of the fourteenth century, which stood, holding a spear in its gauntleted hand near the doorway leading to the various reception rooms, was almost a personal friend. Mrs. Spruce, happily unconscious of the deepening melancholy which had begun to tinge his thoughts, led the way through the hall, still garrulously chirping.

"We've cleaned up wonderfully, considerin'—and it was just the Lord's providence that at Riversford I found a decent

butler and footman what had jes' got the sack from Sir Morton Pippitt's and were lookin' for a place temp'ry, preferring London later, so I persuaded both of 'em to come and try service with a lady for once, instead of with a fussy old ancient, who turns red and blue in the face if he's kept waitin' 'arf a second—and I picked up with a gel what the footman was engaged to, and that'll keep *him* a fixture,—and I found the butler had a hi on a young woman at the public-house 'ere,—so that's what you may call an 'hattraction,' and then I got two more 'andy gels which was jes' goin' off to see about Mrs. Leveson's place, and when I told 'em that there the sugar was weighed out, and the tea dispensed by the ounce, as if it was chemicals, and that please the Lord and anybody else that likes, they'd have better feedin' if they came along with me, they struck a bargain there and then. And then as if there was a special powerful blessin' on it all, who should come down Riversford High Street but one of the best cooks as ever took a job, a Scotch body worth her weight in gold, and she'd be a pretty big parcel to weigh too, but she can send up a dinner for one as easy as for thirty, which is as good a test as boilin' a tater —and 'as got all her wits about her. She was just goin' to advertise for a house party or shootin' job, so we went into the Crown Inn at Riversford and had tea together and settled it. And they all come up in a wagginette together as merry as larks;—so the place is quite lively, Passon, I do assure you, 'specially for a woman like me which have had it all to myself and lonesome like for many years. I've made Kitty useful, too, dustin' and polishin'—gels can't begin their trainin' too early, and all has been goin' on fine;—not but what there's a mighty sight of eatin' and drinkin' now, but it's the Lord's will that human bein's should feed even as the pigs do, 'specially domestic servants, and there's no helpin' of it nor hinderin'—but this mornin's business did put me out a bit, and I do assure you I haven't got over it yet, but howsomever Spruce says 'Do yer dooty!'—and I'm a-doin' it to the best of my belief and 'ope—still it do make my mind a bit ricketty——"

Silently Walden followed her through the rooms, saying

little in response to her remarks, 'ricketty' or otherwise, and noting all the various changes as he went.

In the dining-room there was a great transformation. The fine old Cordova leather chairs were all released from their brown holland coverings,—the long-concealed Flemish tapestries were again unrolled and disclosed to the light of day—valuable canvases that had been turned to the wall to save their colour from the too absorbing sunshine, were now restored to their proper positions, and portraits by Vandyke, and landscapes by Corot gave quite a stately air of occupation to a room, which being large and lofty, had always seemed to Walden the loneliest in the house for lack of a living presence. He trod in the restless wake of Mrs. Spruce, however, without comment other than a word of praise such as she expected, for the general result of her labours in getting the long-disused residence into habitable condition, and was only moved to something like enthusiasm when he reached what was called 'the morning room,' an apartment originally intended to serve as a boudoir for that beautiful Mrs. Vancourt, the bride who never came home. Here all the furniture was of the daintiest design,—here rich cushions of silk and satin were lavishly piled on the luxurious sofas and in the deep easy-chairs,—curtains of cream brocade embroidered by hand with garlands of roses, draped the sides of the deep embrasured window-nook whence two wide latticed doors opened outwards to a smooth terrace bordered with flowers, where two gardeners were busy rolling the rich velvety turf,—and beyond it stretched a great lawn shaded with ancient oaks and elms that must have seen the days of Henry VII. The prospect was fair and soothing to the eyes, and Walden gazing at it, gave a little involuntary sigh of pleasure.

"This is beautiful!" he said, speaking more to himself than to anyone—"Perfectly beautiful!"

"It is so, sir," agreed Mrs. Spruce, with an air of comfortably placid conviction; "There's no doubt about it — it's as beautiful a room as could be made for a queen, though I say it—but whether our new lady will like it, is quite another question. You see, sir, this room was always kept locked in

the Squire's time, and so was all the other rooms as was got ready for the wife as never lived to use them. The Squire wouldn't let a soul inside the doors, not even his daughter. And now, sir, will you please read the letter I got this morning, which as you will notice, is quite nice-like and kindly, more than the other—onny when the boxes came I was a bit upset. You see the letter was registered and had the keys inside it all right."

Walden took the missive in reluctant silence. The same thick notepaper, odorous with crushed violets—the same bold, dashing handwriting he had seen before, but the matter expressed in it was worded somehow in a totally different tone to that of the previous letter from the same hand.

"DEAR MRS. SPRUCE," it ran: "I enclose the keys of my boxes which I am sending in advance, as I never travel with luggage. Kindly unpack all the contents and arrange them in the wardrobes and presses of my mother's rooms. If I remember rightly, these rooms have never been used, but I intend to take them for myself now, so please have everything prepared. I have received your letter in which you say there is some difficulty in getting good servants at so short a notice. I quite understand this, and am sure you will arrange for the best. Should everything not be quite satisfactory, we can make alterations when I come. I expect to arrive home in time for afternoon tea. MARYLLIA VANCOURT."

Walden folded up the letter and gave it back to its owner.

"Well, so far, you have nothing to complain of, Mrs. Spruce," he said, with a little smile; "The lady is evidently prepared to excuse any deficiencies arising from the hurry of your preparations."

"Yes, sir, that may be," answered Mrs. Spruce; "but if so be you saw what I've seen you mightn't take it so easily. Now, sir, if you'll follow me, you'll be able to judge of the quandary we was in till we got our senses back."

Beginning to be vaguely amused and declining to speculate as to the 'quandary' which according to the good woman had resulted in a species of lunacy, Walden followed as he was told, and slowly ascended the broad staircase, one of the finest specimens of Tudor work in all England, with its richly turned balustrades and grotesquely carved headpieces, but as he reached the upper landing, he halted abruptly, seeing through an open door mysterious glimmerings of satins and laces, to which he was entirely unaccustomed.

"What room is that?" he enquired.

"That's what we used to call 'the bride's room,' sir," replied Mrs. Spruce, smoothing down her black skirts with an air of fussy importance, and heaving a sigh; "Miss Maryllia's mother was to have had it. Don't be afraid to step inside, Passon; everythink's been turned out and aired, and there's not a speck of damp or dismals anywhere, and you'll see for yourself what a time we're 'avin' though we're gettin' jes' a bit straight now, and I've 'ad Nancy Pyrle as is 'andy with her pencil to mark things down as they come to 'and. Step inside, Passon Walden,—do step inside!"

But Walden, held back by some instinctive fastidiousness, declined to move further than the threshold of this hitherto closed and sacredly guarded chamber. Leaning against the doorway he looked in wonderingly, with a vague feeling of bewilderment, while Mrs. Spruce, trotting busily ahead, gave instructions to a fresh-faced country lass, who, breathing very hard, as though she were running, was carefully shaking out what seemed to be a fairy's robe of filmy white lace, glistening with pearls.

"Ye see, Passon, this is what all my trouble's about"—she said—"Fancy 'avin' to unpack all these grand clothes, and sort 'em as they comes, not knowin' whether they mayn't fall to bits in our 'ands, some of 'em bein' fine as cobwebs, an' such body linen as was never made for any mortal woman in St. Rest, all lace an' silk an' little ribbins! When the trunks arrived an' we got 'em into the 'all, I felt *that* faint, I do assure ye! For me to 'ave to unpack an' open 'em, and take.

out all the things inside,—ah, Passon, it's an orful 'sponsibility, seein' there's jewels packed among the dresses quite reckless-like, rubies an' sapphires an' diamants, somethin' amazin', and we've taken a reg'ler invent'ry of them all lest somethin' might be missin', for the Lord He only knows whether there might not be fifty thousand pounds of proputty in one of them little kicketty boxes, all velvet and satin, made just as if they was sweetmeats, only when ye looks inside ye sees a sparklin' stone glisterin' at ye, and ye know it's wuth a fortune! I do assure ye, Passon, I've never seen such things in all my life! Miss Maryllia must be mortal extravagant, for there's enough in one o' them boxes to feed the whole village of St. Rest for several years. Ah! Passon, I do assure ye, I've thought of Scripter many a time this mornin'; 'Whose adornin' let it be the adornin' of a meek and quiet spirit,' which is a hornament and no mistake!"

Walden made no remark. It never even occurred to him just then that Mrs. Spruce was unconsciously rendering in her own particular fashion the text he had chosen for the next day's sermon. Never in all his life before had he experienced such strongly mingled sensations of repulsion and interest as at that moment. With a kind of inward indignation, he asked himself what business he had to be there looking curiously into a woman's room, littered with all the fripperies and expensive absurdities of a woman's apparel? Above all, why should he be so utterly ridiculous and inconsequential in his own mind as to find himself deeply fascinated by such a spectacle? In all the years he had passed with his sister, so long as she had lived, he had never seen such a bewildering disorder of feminine clothes. He had never had the opportunity of noting the pathetic difference existing between the toilette surroundings of a woman who is strong and well, and of one who is deprived of all natural coquetry by the cruel ravages of long sickness and disease. His sister, beautiful even in her incurable physical affliction, had always borne that affliction more or less in mind, and had attired herself with a severely simple taste, —her bedroom, where she had had to pass so many weary

hours of suffering, had been a model of almost Spartan-like simplicity, and her dressing-table was wont to be far more conspicuous for melancholy little medicine-phials than for flashing, silver-stoppered cut-glass bottles, exhaling the rarest perfumes. Then, since her death, Walden had lived so entirely alone, that the pretty vanities of bright and healthy women were quite unfamiliar to him.

The present glittering display of openly expressed frivolity seemed curiously new, and vaguely alarming. He was angry with it, yet in a manner attracted. He found himself considering, with a curious uneasiness, two small nondescript pink objects that were lying on the floor at some distance from each other. At a first glance they appeared to be very choice examples of that charming orchid known as the 'Cypripedium,'—but on closer examination it was evident they were merely fashionable evening shoes. Again and again he turned his eyes away from them,—and again and again his glance involuntarily wandered back and rested on their helpless-looking little pointed toes and ridiculously high heels. Considered from a purely 'sanitary' point of view, they were the most wicked, the most criminal, the most absolutely unheard-of shoes ever seen. Why, no human feet of the proper size could possibly get into them, unless they were squeezed,—

"Yes, squeezed!"—repeated Walden inwardly, with a sense of unreasonable irritation; "All the toes cramped and the heels pinched—everything out of joint and distorted—false feet, in fact, like everything else false that has to do with the modern fashionable woman!"

There they lay,—apparently innocent;—but surely detestable, nay even Satanic objects. He determined he would have them removed—picked up—cast out—thrust into the nearest drawer—anywhere, in fact, provided they were out of his stern, clerical sight. Mrs. Spruce was continuing conversation in brisk tones, but whether she was addressing him, or the buxom young woman, who, under her directions was shaking out or folding up the various garments taken out of the various boxes, he did not know, and, as a matter of fact, he did not

care. She sounded like Tennyson's 'Brook,' with a 'Men may come and men may go, but I go on for ever' monotonousness that was as depressing as it was incessant.

He determined to interrupt the purling stream.

"Mrs. Spruce," he began,—then hesitated, as she turned briskly towards him, looking like a human clothes-prop, with both fat arms extended in order to keep well away from contact with the floor a gauzy robe sparkling all over with tiny crystalline drops, which, catching the sunbeams, flashed like little points of flame.

"Beggin' your pardon, Passon, did you speak?"

"Yes. I think you should not let anything lie about, as, for example,—those—" and he pointed to the objectionable shoes with an odd sense of discomfiture; "They appear to be of a delicate colour and might easily get soiled."

Mrs. Spruce peered round over the sparkling substance she held, looking like a very ancient and red-faced cherub peeping over the rim of a moonlit cloud.

"Well, I never!" she exclaimed; "What a hi you have, Passon! What a hi! Now them shoes missed me altogether! They must have dropped out of some of the dresses we've been unfoldin', for the packin's quite reckless-like, and ain't never been done by no trained maid. All hustled-bustled like into the boxes anyhow, as if the person what had done it was in a mortal temper or hurry. Lord! Don't I know how people crams things in when they's in a rage! Ah! Wait till I get rid of all these diamants," and she waddled to the deep oak wardrobe, which stood open, and carefully hung the glittering garment up by its two sleeveholes on two pegs,—then turned round with a sigh. "It's orful what the world's coming to, Passon Walden,—orful! Fancy diamants all sewed on to a gown! I wouldn't let my Kitty in 'ere for any amount of money! She'd be that restless and worritin' and wantin' the like things for 'erself, and the mortal mischief it would be, there's no knowin'! Why, the first 'commercial' as come round 'ere with 'is pack and 'is lies, would get her runnin' off with 'im! Ah! That's jes' where leddies makes such work for

Satan's hands to do; they never thinks of the envy and jealousy and spite as eats away the 'arts of poor gels what sees all these fine things and ain't got no chance for to have them for theirselves!" Here, sidling along the floor, she picked up the pink shoes to which Walden had called her attention, first one and then the other. "Well! Call them shoes! My Kitty couldn't get her 'and into 'em! And as for a foot fittin' in! What a foot! It can't be much bigger'n a baby's. Well, well, what a pair o' shoes!"

She stood looking at them, a fat smile on her face, and Walden moved uneasily from the threshold.

"I'll leave you now, Mrs. Spruce," he said; "You have plenty to do, and I'm in the way here."

"Well, now, Passon, that do beat me!" said Mrs. Spruce plaintively; "I thought you was a-goin' to help us!"

"Help you? I?" and Walden laughed aloud; "My dear woman, do you think I can unpack and unfold ladies' dresses? Of all the many incongruous uses a clergyman was ever put to, wouldn't that be the most impossible?"

"Lord love ye, Passon Walden, I ain't askin' ye no such thing;" retorted Mrs. Spruce; "Don't ye think it! For there's nothin' like a man, passon or no passon, for makin' rumples of every bit of clothes he touches, even his own coats and weskits, and I wouldn't let ye lay hands on any o' these things to save my life. Why, they'd go to pieces at the mere sight of yer fingers, they're so flimsy! What I thought ye might do, was to be a witness to us while we sorted them all. It's a great thing to have a man o' God as a witness to the likes o' this work!"

Again Walden laughed, this time with very genuine heartiness, though he did wish Mrs. Spruce would put away the troublesome pink shoes which she still held, and to which he found his eyes still wandering.

"Nonsense! You don't want any witness!" he said gaily; "What are you thinking about, Mrs. Spruce? When Miss Vancourt is here, all you have to do is to go over every item of her property with her, and see that she finds it all right. If anything is missing, it's not your fault."

"If anythink's missing," echoed Mrs. Spruce in sepulchral tones, "then the Lord knows what we'll do, for it'll be all over, so far as we're consarned! Beggars in the street'll be kings to us. Passon, I reckon ye doesn't read the newspapers much, does ye?"

"Pretty fairly," responded Walden still smiling; "I keep myself as well acquainted as I can with what is going on in the world."

"Does ye now?" And Mrs. Spruce surveyed him admiringly. "Well, now, I shouldn't have thought it, for ye seems as inn'cent as a babby I do assure ye; ye seems jes' that. But mebbe ye doesn't get the same kind o' newspapers which we poor folks gets—reg'ler weekly penny lists o' murders, soocides, railway haccidents, burgul'ries, fires, droppin's down dead suddint, struck by lightnin' and collapsis, with remedies pervided for all in the advertisements invigoratin' to both old and young, bone and sinew, brain and body, whether it be pills, potions, tonics, lotions, ointment or min'ral waters. Them's the sort o' papers we gets, or rather the 'Mother Huff' takes 'em all in for us, an' the 'ole village drinks the 'orrors an' the medicines in with the ale. Ah! It's mighty edifyin', Passon, I do assure ye!—and many of us goes to church on Sundays and reads the 'orrors an' medicines in the arternoon, and whether we remembers your sermon or the 'orrors an' medicines most, the Lord only knows! But it's in them papers I sees how fine leddies goes on nowadays, and if they misses so much as a two-and-sixpenny 'airpin, some of 'em out of sheer spite, will 'aul a gel up 'fore the p'lice and 'ave 'er in condemned cells in no time, so that ye see, Passon, if so be Miss Maryllia counts over the sparkling diamants and one's lost, we'll all be brought 'fore Sir Morton Pippitt as county mag'strate afore we've 'ad time to look at our breakfasts. Wherefore, I sez, why not 'ave a man o' God as witness?"

"Why not, indeed!" returned Walden, playfully; "but your 'man of God' won't be me, Mrs. Spruce! I'm off! I congratulate you on your preparations, and I think you are

doing everything splendidly! If Miss Vancourt does not look upon you as a positive treasure, I shall be very much mistaken! Good-afternoon!"

"Passon, Passon!" urged Mrs. Spruce; "Ye baint goin' already?"

"I must! To-morrow's Sunday, remember!"

"Ah!—that it is!" she sighed, "And my mind sorely misgives me that I never asked the new servants whether they was 'Igh, Low or Roman. It fairly slipped my memory, and they seemed never to think of it themselves. Why didn't they remind me, Passon?—can you answer me that? Which it proves the despisableness of our naturs that we never thinks of the religious sides of ourselves, but only our wages and stummicks. Wages and stummicks comes fust, and the care of the Lord Almighty arterwards. But, there, there!—we're jest a perverse and stiffnecked generation!"

Walden turned away. Mrs. Spruce, at last deciding to resign her hold of the pink shoes, over whose pointed toes she had been moralising, gave them into the care of the rosy-cheeked Phyllis, who was assisting her in her labours, and followed her 'man of God' out to the landing.

"Do ye reely think we're doin' quite right, and that we're quite safe, Passon?" she queried, anxiously.

"You're doing quite right, and you're quite safe," replied Walden laughing. "Go on in your present path of virtue, Mrs. Spruce, and all will be well! I really cannot wait a moment longer. Don't trouble to come and show me out,—I know my way!"

He sprang down the broad stairs as lightly as a boy, leaving Mrs. Spruce at the summit, looking wistfully after him.

"It's a pity he couldn't stay!" she murmured, dolefully; "There's a lace petticut which must be worth a fortune!—I'd have liked 'im to see it!"

But Walden was beyond recall. On reaching the bottom of the staircase he had turned into the picture-gallery, a long, lofty room panelled with Jacobean oak on both sides and hung with choice canvases, the work of the best masters, three

or four fine Gainsboroughs, Peter Lelys and Romneys being among the most notable examples. At one end of the gallery a close curtain of dark green baize covered a picture which was understood to be the portrait of the Mrs. Vancourt who had never lived to see her intended home. The late Squire had himself put up that curtain, and no one had ever dared to lift it. Mrs. Spruce had often been asked to do so, but she invariably refused, 'not wishin' to be troubled with ghosteses of the old Squire' as she frankly explained. Facing this, at the opposite end, hung another picture, disclosed in all its warm and brilliant colouring to the light of day,—the picture of Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt, who, in the time of Charles the Second had been a noted beauty of the 'merry monarch's' reign, and whose counterfeit presentment Mrs. Spruce had styled 'the lady in the vi'let velvet.' John Walden had suddenly taken a fancy to look at this portrait though for ten years he had known it well.

He walked up to it now slowly, studying it critically as the light fell on its rich colouring. The painted lady had a wonderfully attractive face,—the face of a child, piquante, smiling and provocative,—her eyes were witching blue, with a moonlight halo of grey between the black pupil and the azure iris,—her mouth, a trifle large, but pouting in the centre and curved in the 'Cupid's bow' line, suggested sweetness and passion, and her hair,—but surely her hair was indescribable! The painter of Charles the Second's time had apparently found it difficult to deal with,—for there was a warm brown wave there, a tiny reddish ripple behind the small ear, and a flash of golden curls over the white brow, suggestive of all the tints of spring and autumn sunshine. Habited in a riding-dress of velvet the colour of a purple pansy, Mary Elia Adelgisa held her skirt, white gauntleted gloves, and riding-whip daintily in one hand,—her hat, a three-cornered piece of coquetry, lay ready for wear, on a garden-seat hard by,—a blush rosebud was fastened carelessly in her close-fitting bodice, which was turned back with embroidered gold revers, and over her head, great forest trees, heavy with foliage, met in an arch of green. John Walden

stood for a quiet three minutes, studying the picture intently and also the superscription: "Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt, Born May 1st, 1651: Wedded her cousin, Geoffrey de Vaignecourt, June 5th, 1671: Died May 30th, 1681."

"Not a very long life!" he mused: "All the Vaignecourts, or Vancourts, have died somewhat early."

He let his eyes rest again on the portrait lingeringly.

"Mary Elia! I wonder if her descendant, 'Maryllia' is anything like her?"

Slowly turning, he went out of the picture-gallery, across the hall and into the garden, where the faithful Nebbie was waiting for him, amid a company of pigeons who were busy picking up what they fancied from the gravelled path, and who were utterly unembarrassed by the constant waggings of the terrier's rough tail. And he walked somewhat abstractedly through the old paved court, past the unsympathetic sun-dial, and out through the great gates, which were guarded on either side by stone griffins, gripping in their paws worn shields decorated with defaced tracings of the old Vaignecourt emblems. Clematis clasped these fabulous beasts in a dainty embrace, winding little tendrils of delicate green over their curved claws, and festooning their savage-looking heads with large star-like flowers of white and pale mauve, and against one of the weather-beaten shields an early flowering red rose leaned its perfumed head in blushing crimson confidence. Halting a moment in his onward pace, Walden paused, and looked back at the scene regretfully.

"Dear old place!" he said half aloud; "Many and many a happy hour have I passed in it, loving it, reverencing it, honouring its every stone,—as all such relics of a chivalrous and gracious past deserve to be loved, reverenced and honoured. But I fear,—yes!—I fear I shall never again see it quite as I have seen it for the past ten years,—or as I see it now! New days, new ways! And I am not progressive. To me the old days and old ways are best!"

CHAPTER VI

* * * "AND the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you and remain with you always!"

So prayed John Walden, truly and tenderly, stretching out his hands in benediction over the bent heads of his little congregation, which responded with a fervent 'Amen.'

Service was over, and the good folks of St. Rest wended their gradual way out of church to the full sweet sound of an organ voluntary, played by Miss Janet Eden, who, as all the village said of her, 'was a rare 'and at doin' the music proper.' Each man and woman wore their Sunday best,—each girl had some extra bit of finery on, and each lad sported either a smart necktie or wore a flower in his buttonhole, as a testimony to the general festal feeling inspired by a day when ordinary work is set aside for the mingled pleasures of prayer, meditation and promiscuous love-making. The iconoclasts who would do away with the appointed seventh day of respite from the hard labours of every-day life, deserve hanging without the mercy of trial. A due observance of Sunday, and especially the English country observance of Sunday, is one of the saving graces of our national constitution. In the large towns, a growing laxity concerning the 'keeping of the seventh day holy,' is plainly noticeable, the pernicious example of London 'smart' society doing much to lessen the old feeling of respect for the day and its sacredness; but in small greenwood places, where it is still judged decent and obedient to the laws of God, to attend Divine worship at least once a day,—when rough manual toil is

set aside, and the weary and soiled labourer takes a pleasure in being clean, orderly and cheerfully respectful to his superiors, Sunday is a blessing and an educational force that can hardly be over-estimated.

In such a peaceful corner as St. Rest it was a very day of days. Tourists seldom disturbed its tranquillity, the 'Mother Huff' public-house affording but sorry entertainment to such parties; the motor-bicycle, with its detestable noise, insufferable odour and dirty, oil-stained rider in goggled spectacles, was scarcely ever seen,—and motor-cars always turned another way on leaving the county town of Riversford, in order to avoid the sharp ascent from the town, as well as the still sharper and highly dangerous descent into the valley again, where the little mediæval village lay nestled. Thus it was enabled to gather to itself a strangely beautiful halcyon calm on the Lord's Day,—and in fair Spring weather like the present, dozed complacently under the quiet smile of serene blue skies, soothed to sleep by the rippling flow of its ribbon-like river, and receiving from hour to hour a fluttering halo of doves' wings, as these traditional messengers of peace flew over the quaint old houses, or rested on the gabled roofs, spreading out their snowy tails like fans to the warmth of the sun. The churchyard was the recognised meeting-place for all the gossips of the village after the sermon was over and the blessing pronounced,—and the brighter and warmer the weather, the longer and more desultory the conversation.

On this special Sunday, the worthy farmers and their wives, with their various cronies and confidants, gathered together in larger groups than usual, and lingered about more than was even their ordinary habit. Their curiosity was excited,—so were their faculties of criticism. The new servants from the Manor had attended church, sitting all together in a smart orderly row, and suggesting in their neat spick-and-span attire an unwonted note of novelty, of fashion, of change, nay, even of secret and suppressed society wickedness. Their looks, their attitudes, their whisperings, their movements, furnished plenty of matter to talk about,—particularly as Mrs. Spruce had apparently 'given herself airs' and marshalled them in and marshalled

them out again, without stopping to talk to her village friends as usual,—which was indeed a veritable marvel,—or to vouchsafe any information respecting the expected return of her new mistress, an impending event which was now well known throughout the whole neighbourhood. Oliver Leach, the land agent, had arrived at the church-door in an open dog-cart, and had sat through the service looking as black as thunder, or as Bainton elegantly expressed it: 'as cheerful as a green apple with a worm in it.' Afterwards, he had driven off at a rattling pace, exchanging no word with anyone. Such conduct, so the village worthies opined, was bound to be included among the various signs and tokens which were ominous of a coming revolution in the moral and domestic atmosphere of St. Rest.

Then again, the 'Passon's' sermon that morning had been something of a failure. Walden himself, all the time he was engaged in preaching it, had known that it was a lame, halting and perfunctory discourse, and he had felt fully conscious that a patient tolerance of him on the part of his parishioners had taken the place of the respectful interest and attention they usually displayed. He was indeed sadly at a loss concerning 'the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit.' He had desired to recommend the cultivation of such a grace in the most forcible manner, yet he found himself wondering why fashionable women wore pink shoes much smaller than the natural size of the human foot? To be 'meek and quiet' was surely an excellent thing, but then it was impossible for any man with blood in his veins to feel otherwise than honestly indignant at the extravagance displayed by certain modern ladies in the selection of their gowns! Flashing sparks of pearl and crystal sewn on cloud-like tissues and chiffons, danced before his eyes, as he ponderously weighed out the spiritual advantages of being meek and quiet; and his metaphors became as hazy as the deductions he drew from his text were vague and difficult to follow. He was uncomfortably conscious of a slight flush rising to his face, as he met the bland enquiring stare of Sir Morton Pippitt's former butler—now on 'temp'ry' service at the Manor,—he became aware that there was also

a new and rather pretty housemaid beside the said butler, who whispered when she ought to have been silent,—and he saw blankness on the fat face of Mrs. Spruce, a face which was tied up like a round red damaged sort of fruit in a black basket-like bonnet, fastened with very broad violet strings. Now Mrs. Spruce always paid the most pious attention to his sermons, and jogged her husband at regular intervals to prevent that worthy man from dozing, though she knew he could not hear a word of anything that was said, and that, therefore, he might as well have been allowed to sleep,—but on this occasion John was sure that even she failed to be interested in his observations on that 'ornament,' which she called 'hornament,' of the meek and quiet spirit, pronounced to be of such 'great price.' He realised that if any 'great price' was at all in question with her that morning, it was the possible monetary value of her new lady's wardrobe. So that on the whole he was very glad when he came to the end of his ramble among strained similes, and was able to retire altogether from the gaze of the different pairs of eyes, cow-like, sheep-like, bird-like, dog-like, and human, which in their faithful watching of his face as he preached, often moved him to a certain embarrassment, though seldom as much as on this occasion. With his disappearance from the pulpit, and his subsequent retreat round by the back of the churchyard into the privacy of his own garden, the tongues of the gossips, restrained as long as their minister was likely to be within earshot, broke loose and began to wag with glib rapidity.

"Look 'ee 'ere, Tummas," said one short, thick-set man, addressing Bainton; "Look 'ee 'ere—thy measter baint oop to mark this marnin'! Seemed as if he couldn't find the ways nor the meanin's o' the Lord nohow!"

Bainton slowly removed his cap from his head and looked thoughtfully into the lining, as though seeking for inspiration there, before replying. The short, thick-set man was an important personage,—no less than the proprietor of the 'Mother Huff' public-house; and not only was he proprietor of the said public-house, but brewer of all the ale he sold

there. Roger Buggins was a man to be reckoned with, and he expected to be treated with almost as much consideration as the 'Passon' himself. Buggins wore a very ill-fitting black suit on Sundays, which made him look like a cross between a waiter and an undertaker; and he also supported on his cranium a very tall top-hat with an extra wide brim, suggesting in its antediluvian shape a former close acquaintance with cast-off clothing stores.

"He baint himself,"—reiterated Buggins emphatically; "He was fair mazed and dazed with his argifyin'. Meek and quiet sperrit'! Who wants the like o' that in this 'ere mortal wurrld, where we all commences to fight from the moment we lays in our cradles till the last kick we gives 'fore we goes to our graves? Meek and quiet goes to prison more often than rough and ready!"

"Mebbe Passon Walden was thinkin' of Oliver Leach," suggested Bainton with a slight twinkle in his eye; "And 'ow m'appen we'd best be all of us meek and quiet when he's by. It might be so, Mr. Buggins,—Passon's a rare one to guess as 'ow the wind blows nor'-nor'-east sometimes in the village, for all that it's a warm day and the peas comin' on beautiful. Eh, now, Mr. Buggins?" This with a conciliatory air, for Bainton had a little reckoning at the 'Mother Huff' and desired to be all that was agreeable to its proprietor.

Buggins snorted a defiant snort.

"Oliver Leach indeed!" he ejaculated. "Meek an' quiet suits him down to the ground, it do! There's a man wot's likely to have a kindly note of warnin' from my best fist, if he comes larruppin' round my place too often. 'Ave ye 'eard as 'ow he's chalked the Five Sisters?"

"Now don't go for to say that!" expostulated Bainton gently. "'E runs as near the wind as he can, but 'e'd never be stark starin' mad enough to chalk the Five Sisters!"

"Chalk 'em 'e *has*!" returned Buggins, putting quite a strong aspirate where he generally left it out,—"And down they're comin' on Wednesday marnin'. Which I sez yeste'day

to Adam Frost 'ere: if the Five Sisters is to lay low, what next?"

"Ay! ay!" chorussed several other villagers who had been listening eagerly to the conversation; "You say true, Mr. Buggins—you say Gospel true. If the Five Sisters lay low, what next!"

And dismal shakings of the head and rollings of the eyes from all parties followed this proposition.

"What next," echoed the sexton, Adam Frost, who on hearing his name brought into the argument, showed himself at once ready to respond to it. "Why next we'll not have a tree of any size anywhere near the village, for if timber's to be sold, sold it will be, and the only person we'll be able to rely on for a bit of green shade or shelter will be Passon Walden, who wouldn't have a tree cut down anywhere on his land, no, not if he was starving. Ah! If the old Squire were alive he'd sooner have had his own 'ead chopped off than the Five Sisters laid low!"

By this time a considerable number of the villagers had gathered round Roger Buggins as the centre of the discussion,—some out of curiosity, and others out of a vague and entirely erroneous idea that perhaps if they took the proper side of the argument 'refreshers' in the way of draughts of home-brewed ale at the 'Mother Huff' between church hours might be offered as an amicable end to the conversation.

"Someone should tell Miss Vancourt about it; she's coming home to the Manor on Tuesday," suggested the barmaid of the 'Mother Huff,' a smart-looking young woman, who was however looked upon with grave suspicion by her feminine neighbours, because she dressed 'beyond her station'; "P'raps she'd do something?"

"Not she!" said Frost, cynically; "She's a fine lady,—been livin' with 'Mericans what will eat banknotes for breakfast, in order to write about it to the papers arterwards. Them sort of women takes no 'count o' trees, except to make money out of 'em."

Here there was a slight stir among the group, as they saw

a familiar figure slowly approaching them,—that of a very old man, wearing a particularly clean smock-frock and a large straw hat, who came out from under the church porch like a quaint, moving, mediæval Dutch picture. Shuffling along, one halting step at a time, and supporting himself on a stout ash stick, this venerable personage made his way, with a singular doggedness and determination of movement, up to the group of gossips. Arriving among them he took off his straw hat, and producing a blue spotted handkerchief from its interior wiped the top of his bald head vigorously.

"Now, what are ye at?" he said slowly; "What are ye at? All clicketin' together like grasshoppers in a load of hay! What's the mischief? Whose character are ye bitin' bits out of, like mice in an old cheese? Eh? Lord, Lord! Eighty-nine years o' livin' wi' ye, summer in and summer out, don't improve ye,—talk to ye as I will and as I may, ye're all as mis'able sinners as ever ye was, and never a saint among ye 'cept the one in the Sarky Fagus."

Here, pausing for breath, the ancient speaker wiped his head again, carefully flattening down with the action a few stray wisps of thin white hair, while a smile of tranquil and superior wisdom spread itself among the countless wrinkles of his sun-browned face, like a ray of winter sunshine awakening rippling reflections on a half-frozen pool.

"We ain't doin' nothin', Josey!" said Buggins, almost timidly.

"Nor we ain't sayin' nothin'," added Bainton.

"We be as harmless as doves," put in Adam Frost with a sly chuckle; "and we ain't no match for sarpints!"

"Ain't you looking well, Mr. Letherbarrow!" ejaculated the smartly dressed barmaid; "Just wonderful for your time of life!"

"My time o' life?" And Josey Letherbarrow surveyed the young woman with an inimitable expression of disdain; "Well, it's a time o' life *you'll* never reach, sane or sound, my gel, take my word for't! Fine feathers makes fine birds, but the life is more'n the meat and the body more'n raiment. And as

for 'armless as doves and no match for sarpints, ye may be all that and more, which is no sort of argyment, and when I sez 'what mischief are ye all up to' I sez it, and expecks a harnser, and a harnser I'll 'ave, or I'll reckon to know the reason why!"

The men and women glanced at each other. It was unnecessary, and it would certainly be inhuman, to irritate old Josey Letherbarrow, considering his great age and various infirmities.

"We was jest a-sayin' a word or two about the Five Sisters—" began Adam Frost.

"Ay! ay!" said Josey; "That ye may do and no 'arm come of it; I knows 'em well! Five of the finest beech-trees in all England!—Ay! ay! th' owld Squire was main proud of 'em——"

"They be comin' down," said Buggins; "Oliver Leach's chalk mark's on 'em for Wednesday marnin'."

"Comin' down!" echoed Josey—"Comin' down? Gar'n with ye all for a parcel o' silly idgits wi' neither rhyme nor reason nor backbone! Comin' down! Why ye might as well tell me the Manor-house was bein' turned into a cow-shed! Comin' down! Gar'n!"

"It's true, Josey," said Adam Frost, beginning to make his way towards the gate of the churchyard, for he had just spied one of his numerous 'olive-branches,' frantically beckoning him home to dinner, and he knew by stern experience what it meant if Mrs. Frost and the family were kept waiting for the Sunday's meal. "It's true, and you'll find it so. And whether it'll be any good speakin' to the new lady who's comin' home on Tuesday, or whether the Five Sisters won't be all corpses afore she comes, there's no knowin'. The Lord He gave the trees, but whether the Lord He gave Oliver Leach to take 'em away again after a matter of three or four hundred year is mighty doubtful!"

Old Josey looked stupefied.

"The Five Sisters comin' down!" he repeated dully; "May you never live to do my buryin', Adam Frost, if it's true!—and that's the worst wish I can give ye!"

But Adam Frost here obeyed the call of his domestic belongings, and hurried away without response.

Josey leaned on his stick thoughtfully for a minute, and then resumed his slow shuffling way. Any one of the men or women near him would have willingly given him a hand to assist his steps, but they all knew that he would be highly incensed if they dared to show that they considered him in any way feeble or in need of support. So they contented themselves with accompanying him at his own snail's pace, and at such a distance as to be within hearing of any remarks he might let fall, without intruding too closely on the special area in which he chose to stump along homewards.

"The Five Sisters comin' down, and th' owld Squire's daughter comin' 'ome!" he muttered; "They two things is like ile and water,—nothin' 'ull make 'em mix. The Squire's daughter—ay—ay! It seems but only yeste'day the Squire died! And she was a fine mare that threw him, too,—Firefly was her name. Ay—ay! It seems but yeste'day—but yeste'day!"

"D'ye mind the Squire's daughter, Josey?" asked one of the village women sauntering a little nearer to him.

"Mind her?" And Josey Letherbarrow halted abruptly. "Do I mind my own childer? It seems but yeste'day, I tell ye, that the Squire died, but mebbe it's a matter of six-an'-twenty 'ear agone since 'e came to me where I was a-workin' in 'is fields, and he pinted out to me the nurse wot was walkin' up and down near the edge of the pasture carryin' his baby all in long clothes. 'See that, Josey!' he sez, an' 'is eyes were all wild-like an' 'is lips was a' tremblin'; 'That little white thing is all I've got left of the wife I was bringin' 'ome to be the sunshine of the old Manor. I felt like killin' that child, Josey, when it was born, because its comin' into this wurrld killed its mother. That was an unnat'ral thing, Josey,' sez he—'There was no God in it, only a devil!' and 'is lips trembled more'n ever—'no woman ought to die in givin' birth to a child—it's jes' wicked an' cruel! I would say that to God Himself, if I knew Him!' An' he clenched 'is

fist 'ard, an' then 'e went on—'But though I wanted to kill the little creature, I couldn't do it, Josey, I couldn't! Its eyes were like those of my Dearest. So I let it live; an' I'll do my best by it, Josey,'—yes, them's the words 'e said—'I'll do my best by it!'"

Here Josey broke off in his narrative, and resumed his crawling pace.

"You ain't finished, 'ave ye, Josey?" said Roger Buggins propitiatingly, drawing closer to the old man. "It's powerful interestin', all this 'ere!"

Josey halted again.

"Powerful interestin'? O' course it is! There ain't nobody's story wot ain't interestin', if ye onny knows it. An' it's all six-an'-twenty year agone now; but I can see th' owld Squire still, an' the nurse walkin' slow up an' down by the border of the field, hushin' the baby to sleep. And 'twas a good sound baby, too, an' thrived fine; an' 'fore we knew where we was, instid of a baby there was a little gel runnin' wild all over the place, climbin' trees, swarmin' up hay-stacks, an' up to all sorts of mischief—Lord, Lord!" And Josey began to chuckle with a kind of inward merriment; "I'll never forget the day that child sat down on a wopses' nest an' got all 'er little legs stung;—she was about five 'ear old then, an' she never cried—not she!—the little proud spitfire that she was, she jes' stamped 'er mite of a foot an' she sez, sez she: 'Did God make the wopses?' An' 'er nurse sez to 'er: 'Yes, o' course, lovey, God made 'em.' 'Then I don't think much of Him!' sez she. Lord, Lord! We larfed nigh to split ourselves that arternoon;—we was all makin' 'ay an' th' owld Squire was workin' wi' us for fun-like. 'I don't think much o' God, father!'—sez Miss Maryllia, runnin' up to 'im, an' liftin' up all 'er petticuts an' shewin' the purtiest little legs ye ever seed; 'Nurse sez He made the wopses!' He-ee-ee-hor-hor-hor!"

A slow smile was reflected on the faces of the persons who heard this story,—a smile that implied lurking doubt as to whether it was quite the correct or respectful thing to find

entertainment in an anecdote which included a description of 'the purtiest little legs' of the lady of the Manor whose return to her native home was so soon expected,—but Josey Letherbarrow was a privileged personage, and he might say what others dared not. As philosopher, general moralist and purveyor of copy-book maxims, he was looked upon in the village as the Nestor of the community, and in all discussions or disputations was referred to as final arbitrator and judge. Born in St. Rest, he had never been out of it, except on an occasional jaunt to Riversford in the carrier's cart. He had married a lass of the village, who had been his playmate in childhood, and who, after giving him four children, had died when she was forty,—the four children had grown up and in their turn had married and died; but he, like a hardy old tree, had still lived on, with firm roots well fixed in the soil that had bred him. Life had now become a series of dream pictures with him, representing every episode of his experience. His mind was clear, and his perception keen; he seldom failed to recollect every detail of a circumstance when once the clue was given, and the right little cell in his brain was stirred. To these qualities he added a stock of good sound common sense, with a great equableness of temperament, though he could be cynical, and even severe, when occasion demanded. Just now, however, his venerable countenance was radiant,—his few remaining tufts of white hair glistened in the sun like spun silver,—his figure in its homely smock, leaning on the rough ash stick, expressed in its very attitude benevolence and good-humour, and 'the purtiest little legs' had evidently conjured up a vision of childish grace and innocence before his eyes, which he was loth to let go.

"She was took away arter the old Squire was killed, worn't she?" asked Bainton, who was drinking in all the information he could, in order to have something to talk about to his master, when the opportunity offered itself.

"Ay! ay! She was took away," replied Josey, his smile darkening into a shadow of weariness; "The Squire's neck was broke with Firefly—every man, woman and child knows

that about here—an' then 'is brother came along, 'im wot 'ad married a 'Merican wife wi' millions, an' 'adn't got no children of their own. An' they took the gel away with —'em a purty little slip of about fifteen then, with great big eyes and a lot of bright 'air:—don't none of ye remember 'er?"

Mr. Buggins shook his head.

"'Twas afore my time," he said. "I ain't had the 'Mother Huff' more'n eight years."

"I seed 'er once," said Bainton—"but onny once—that was when I was workin' for the Squire as extra 'and. But I disremember 'er face."

"Then ye never looked at it," said Josey, with a chuckle; "or bein' made man ye wouldn't 'ave forgot it. Howsomever, it's 'ears ago an' she's a woman growed—she ain't been near the place all this time, which shows as 'ow she don't care about it, bein' took up with 'er 'Merican aunt and the millions. An' she'd got a nice little penny of 'er own, too, for th' owld Squire left 'er all he 'ad, an' she was to come into it all when she was of age. An' now she's past bein' of age, a woman of six-an'-twenty,—an' 'er rich uncle's dead, they say, so I suppose she an' the 'Merican aunt can't work it out together. Eh dear! Well, well! Changes there must be, and changes there will be, and if the Five Sisters is a-comin' down, then there's ill-luck brewin' for the village, an' for every man, woman and child in it! Mark my wurrd!"

And he resumed his hobbling trudge, shaking his head dolefully.

"Don't say that, Josey!" murmured one of the women with a little shudder; "You didn't ought to talk about ill-luck. Don't ye know it's onlucky to talk about ill-luck?"

"No, I don't know nothin' o' the sort," replied Josey, "Luck there is, and ill-luck,—an' ye can talk as ye like about one or t'other, it don't make no difference. An' there's some things as comes straight from the Lord, and there's others what comes straight from the devil, an' ye've got to take them *as* they comes. 'Tain't no use floppin' on yer knees an' cryin' on either the Lord or the devil,—they's outside of ye an' jest

amusin' theirselves as they likes. Mussy on me! D'ye think I don't know when the Lord 'ides 'is face behind the clouds playin' peep-bo for a bit, and lets the devil 'ave it all 'is own way? An' don't I know 'ow, when old Nick is jes' in the thick o' the fun 'avin' a fine time with the poor silly souls o' men, the Lord suddenly comes out o' the cloud and sez, sez He: 'Now 'nuff o' this 'ere; get thee behind Me!' An' then—an' then—," here Josey paused, and struck his staff violently into the earth,—"an' then there's a noise as of a mighty wind rushin', an' the angels all falls to trumpetin' an' cries: 'Alleluia! Lift up your 'eads ye everlasting gates that the King of Glory may come in'!"

The various village loafers sauntering beside their venerable prophet, listened to this outburst with respectful awe.

"He's meanderin'," said Bainton in a low tone to the portly proprietor of the 'Mother Huff'; "It's wonderful wot poltry there is in 'im, when 'e gives way to it!"

'Poltry' was the general term among the frequenters of the 'Mother Huff' for 'poetry.'

"Ay, ay!" replied Buggins, somewhat condescendingly, as one who bore in mind that he was addressing a debtor; "I don't understan' poltry myself, but Josey speaks fine when he has a mind to—there's no doubt of that. Look 'ee 'ere, now; there's Ipsie Frost runnin' to 'im!"

And they all turned their eyes on a flying bundle of curls, rosy cheeks, fat legs and clean pinafore, that came speeding towards old Josey, with another young feminine creature scampering after it crying:

"Ipsie! Hip-po-ly-ta! Baby! Come back to your dinner!"

But Hippolyta was a person evidently accustomed to have her own way, and she ran straight up to Josey Letherbarrow as though he were the one choice hero picked out of a world.

"Zozey!" she screamed, stretching out a pair of short, mottled arms; "My own bootiful Zozey-posey! Tum and pick fowers!"

With an ecstatic shriek at nothing in particular, she caught the edge of the old man's smock.

"My Zozey," she said purringly, "'Oo vezy old, but I loves 'oo!"

A smile and then a laugh went the round of the group. They were all accustomed to Ipsie's enthusiasms. Josey Letherbarrow paused a minute to allow his small admirer to take firm hold of his garments, and patted her little head with his brown wrinkled hand.

"We'se goin' sweetheartin', ain't we, Ipsie," he said gently, the beautiful smile that made his venerable face so fine and lovable, again lighting up his sunken eyes. "Come along, little lass! Come along!"

"She ain't finished her dinner!" breathlessly proclaimed a long-legged girl of about ten, who had run after the child, being one of her numerous sisters; "Mother said she was to come back straight."

"I s'ant go back!" declared Ipsie defiantly; "Zozey and me's sweetheartin'!"

Old Josey chuckled.

"That's so! So we be!" he said tranquilly; "Come along, little lass! Come along!" And to the panting sister of the tiny autocrat, he said: "You go on, my gel! I'll bring the baby, 'oldin' on jest as she is now to my smock. She won't stir more'n a fond bird wot's stickin' its little claws into ye for shelter. I'll bring 'er along 'ome, an' she'll finish 'er dinner fine, like a real good baby! Come along, little lass! Come along!"

So murmuring, the old man and young child went on together, and the group of villagers dispersed. Roger Buggins, however, paused a moment before turning up the lane which led to the 'Mother Huff.'

"You tell Passon," he said addressing Bainton, "You tell him as 'ow the Five Sisters be chalked for layin' low on Wednesday marnin'!"

"Never fear!" responded Bainton; "I'll tell 'im. If 'tworn't Sunday, I'd tell 'im now, but its onny fair he should

'ave a bit o' peace on the seventh day like the rest of us. He'll be fair mazed like when he knows it,—ay! and I shouldn't wonder if he gave Oliver Leach a bit of 'is mind. For all that he's so quiet, there's a real devil in 'im wot the Sperrit o' God keeps down,—but it's there, lurkin' low in 'is mind, an' when 'is eyes flashes blue like lightnin' afore a storm, the devil looks straight out of 'im, it do reely now!"

"Well, well!" said Buggins, tolerantly, with the dignified air of one closing the discussion; "Devil or no devil, you tell 'im as 'ow the Five Sisters be chalked for layin' low on Wednesday marnin'. Good-day t'ye!"

"Good-day!" responded Bainton, and the two worthies parted, each to go on their several ways, Buggins to the 'Mother Huff' from whose open latticed windows the smell of roast beef and onions, which generally composed the Buggins' Sunday meal, came in odorous whiffs down the little lane, almost smothering the delicate perfume of the sprouting sweet-briar hedges on either side, and the nodding cowslips in the grass below; Bainton to his own cottage on the border of his master's grounds, a pretty little dwelling with a thatched roof almost overgrown with wistaria just breaking into flower.

Far away from St. Rest, the greater world swung on its way; the whirl of society, politics, fashion and frivolity revolved like the wheel in a squirrel's cage, round which the poor little imprisoned animal leaps and turns incessantly in a miserable make-believe of forest freedom,—but to the old gardener who lifted the latch of his gate and went in to the Sunday dinner prepared for him by his stout and energetic helpmate, who was one of the best dairy-women in the whole countryside, there was only one grave piece of news in the universe worth considering or discussing, and that was the 'layin' low of the Five Sisters.'

"Never!" said Mrs. Bainton, as she set a steaming beef-steak pudding in its basin on the table and briskly untied the ends of the cloth in which it had been boiling. "Never, Tom! You don't tell me! The Five Sisters comin' down! Why, what is Oliver Leach thinking about?"

"Himself, I reckon!" responded her husband, "and his own partikler an' malicious art o' forestry. Which consists in barin' the land as if it was a judge's chin, to be clean-shaved every marnin'. My wurrd! Won't Passon Walden be just wild! M'appen he's heard of it already, for he seems main worrited about somethin' or other. I've allus thought 'im wise-like an' sensible for a man in the Church wot ain't got much chance of knowin' the wurrld, but he was jes' meanderin' along to-day—meanderin' an' jabberin' about a meek an' quiet sperrit, as if any of us wanted that kind o' thing 'ere! Why it's fightin' all the time! If 'tain't Sir Morton Pippitt, it's Leach, an' if 'tain't Leach it's Putty Leveson—an' if 'tain't Leveson, why it's Adam Frost an' his wife, an' if 'tain't Frost an' his wife, why it's you an' me, old gel! We can get up a breeze as well as any couple wot was ever jined in the bonds of 'oley matterimony! Hor–hor–hor! 'Meek an' quiet sperrit,' sez he—'have all of ye meek an' quiet sperrits'! Why he ain't got one of 'is own! Wait till he 'ears of the Five Sisters comin' down! See 'im then! Or wait till Miss Vancourt arrives an' begins to muddle round with the church!"

"Nonsense! She won't muddle round with the church," said Mrs. Bainton cheerfully, sitting down to dinner opposite her husband; "What nesh fools men are, to be sure! Everyone says she's a fine lady 'customed to all sorts of show and gaiety and the like—what will she want to do with the church? Ten to one she never goes inside it!"

"You shouldn't bet, old woman, 'tain't moral," said Bainton, with a chuckle; "You ain't got ten to bet agin one—we couldn't spare so much. If she doos nothing else, she'll dekrate the church at 'Arvest 'Ome an' Christmas—that's wot leddies allus fusses about—dekratin'. Lord, Lord! The mess they makes when they starts on it, an' the mischief they works! Tearin' down the ivy, scrattin' up the moss, pullin' an' grabbin' at the flowers wot's taken months to grow,—for all the wurrld as if they was cats out for a 'oliday. I tell ye it's been a speshul providence for us 'ere, that Passon Walden ain't got no wife,—if he 'ad, she'd a been at the dekratin' game long afore.

now. Our church would be jes' spoilt with a lot o' trails o' weed round it—but you mark my wurrd!—Miss Vancourt will be dekratin' the Saint in the coffin at 'Arvest 'Ome wi' corn and pertaters an' vegetable marrers, all a-growin' and a-blowin' afore we knows it. There ain't no sense o' fitness in the feminine natur!"

Mrs. Bainton laughed good-naturedly.

"That's quite true!" she agreed; "If there were, I shouldn't have made Sunday pudding for a man who talks too much to eat it while it's hot. Keep your tongue in your mouth, Tom! —use it for tastin' jes' now an' agin!"

Bainton took the hint and subsided into silent enjoyment of his food. Only once again he spoke in the course of the meal, and that was during the impressive pause between pudding and cheese.

"When he knows as 'ow the Five Sisters be chalked, Passon Walden's sure to do somethin'," he said.

"Ay!" responded his wife thoughtfully; "he's sure to do something."

"What d'ye think he'll do?" queried Bainton, somewhat anxiously.

"Oh, you know best, Tom," replied his buxom partner, setting a flat Dutch cheese before him and a jug of foaming beer; "There ain't no sense o' fitness in *me*, bein' a woman! You know best!"

Bainton lowered his eyes sheepishly. As usual his better half had closed the argument unanswerably.

CHAPTER VII

SELDOM in the placid course of years had St. Rest ever belied its name, or permitted itself to suffer loss of dignity by any undue display of excitement. The arrival of John Walden as minister of the parish,—the re-building of the church, and the discovery of the mediæval sarcophagus, which old Josey Letherbarrow always called the Sarky Fagus, together with the consecration ceremony by Bishop Brent,—were the only episodes in ten years that had moved it slightly from its normal calm. For though rumours of wars and various other mishaps and tribulations, reached it through the medium of the newspapers in the ordinary course, it concerned itself not at all with these, such matters being removed and apart from its own way of life and conduct. It was a little world in itself, and had only the vaguest interest in any other world, save perhaps the world to come, which was indeed a very real prospect to most of the villagers, their inherited tendency being towards a quaint and simple piety that was as childlike as it was sincere. The small congregation to which John Walden preached twice every Sunday was composed of as honest men and clean-minded women as could be found in all England,—men and women with straight notions of honour and duty, and warm, if plain, conceptions of love, truth and family tenderness. They had their little human failings and weaknesses, thanks to Mother Nature, whose children we all are, and who sets her various limitations for the best of us,—but, taken on the whole, they were peculiarly unspoilt by the iconoclastic march of progress; and 'advanced' notions of doubt as to a God, and

scepticism as to a future state, had never clouded their quiet minds. Walden had taken them well in hand from the beginning of his ministry,—and being much of a poet and dreamer at heart, he had fostered noble ideals among them, which he taught in simple yet attractive language, with the happiest results. The moral and mental attitude of the villagers generally was a philosophic cheerfulness and obedience to the will of God,—but this did not include a tame submission to tyranny, or a passive acceptance of injury inflicted upon them by merely human oppressors.

Hence,—though any disturbance of the daily equanimity of their agricultural life and pursuits was quite an exceptional circumstance, the news of the 'layin' low of the Five Sisters' was sufficient cause, when once it became generally known, for visible signs of trouble. In its gravity and importance it almost overtopped the advent of the new mistress of the Manor; and when on Tuesday it was whispered that 'Passon Walden' had himself been to expostulate with Oliver Leach concerning the meditated murder of the famous trees, and that his expostulations had been all in vain, clouded brows and ominous looks were to be seen at every corner where the men halted on their way to the fields, or where the women gathered to gossip in the pauses of their domestic labour. Walden himself, pacing impatiently to and fro in his garden, was for once more disturbed in his mind than he cared to admit. When he had been told early on Monday morning of the imminent destruction awaiting the five noble beeches which, in their venerable and broadly-branching beauty, were one of the many glories of the woods surrounding Abbot's Manor, he was inclined to set it down to some capricious command issued by the home-coming mistress of the estate; and, in order to satisfy himself whether this was, or was not the case, he had done what was sorely against his own sense of dignity to do,—he had gone at once to interview Oliver Leach personally on the subject. But he had found that individual in the worst of all possible moods for argument, having been, as he stated, 'passed over' by Miss Vancourt. That lady had not, he said, written to inform him of her intended

return, therefore,—so he argued,—it was not his business to be aware of it.

"Miss Vancourt hasn't told me anything, and of course I don't know anything," he said carelessly, standing in his doorway and keeping his hat on in the minister's presence; "My work is on the land, and when timber has to be felled it's my affair and nobody else's. I've been agent on these estates since the Squire's death, and I don't want to be taught my duty by any man."

"But surely your duty does not compel you to cut down five of the finest old trees in England," said Walden, hotly,—"They have been famous for centuries in this neighbourhood. Have you any right to fell them without special orders?"

"Special orders?" echoed Leach with a sneer; "I've had no 'special order' for ten years at least! My employers trust me to do what I think best, and I've every right to act accordingly. The trees will begin to rot in another eighteen months or so,—just now they're in good condition and will fetch a fair price. You stick to your church, Parson Walden,—you know all about that, no doubt!—but don't come preaching to me about the felling of timber. That's my business,—not yours!"

Walden flushed, and bit his lip. His blood grew warm with indignation, and he involuntarily clenched his fist. But he suppressed his rising wrath with an effort.

"You may as well keep a civil tongue in your head, Mr. Leach—it will do you no harm!" he said quietly; "I have no wish to interfere with what you conceive to be your particular code of duty; but I think that before you destroy what can never be replaced, you should consult the owner of the trees, Miss Vancourt, especially as her return is fixed for to-morrow."

"As I told you before, I know nothing about her return," replied Leach, obstinately; "I am not supposed to know. And whether she's here or away, makes no difference to me. I know what's to be done, and I shall do it."

Walden's eyes flashed. Strive as he would, he could not disguise his inward contempt for this petty jack-in-office,—and

his keen glance was, to the perverse nature of the ill-conditioned boor he addressed, like the lash of a whip on the back of a snarling cur.

"I know what's to be done, and I shall do it," Leach repeated in a louder tone; "And all the sentimental rot ever talked in the village about the Five Sisters won't make me change my mind,—no, nor all the sermons on meek and quiet spirits neither! That's my last word, Mr. Walden, and you may take it for what it is worth!"

Walden swung round on his heel and went his way without replying. Outwardly, he was calm enough, but inwardly he was in a white heat of anger. His thoughts dwelt with a passionate insistence on the grand old trees with their great canopies of foliage, where hundreds of happy birds annually made their homes,—where, with every recurring Spring, the tender young leaves sprouted forth from the aged gnarled boughs, expressing the joy of a life that had outlived whole generations of men—where, in the long heats of summer broad stretches of shade lay dense on the soft grass, offering grateful shelter from the noon-day sun to the browsing cattle, —and where with the autumn's breath, the slow and glorious transformation of green leaves to gold, with flecks of scarlet between, made a splendour of colour against the pale grey-blue sky, such as artists dream of and with difficulty realise. All this wealth of God-granted natural beauty,—the growth of centuries,—was to perish in a single morning! Surely it was a crime!—surely it was a wicked and wanton deed, for which there could be no sane excuse offered! Sorrowfully, and with bitterness, did Walden relate to his gardener, Bainton, the failure of his attempt to bring Oliver Leach to reason,—solemnly, and in subdued silence did Bainton hear the tale.

"Well, well, Passon," he said, when his master had finished; "You doos your best for us, and no man can't say but what you've done it true ever since you took up with this 'ere village,—and you've tried to save the Five Sisters, and if 'tain't no use, why there's no more to be said. Josey Letherbarrow

was for walkin' up to the Manor an' seein' Miss Vancourt herself, as soon as iver she gets within her own door,—but Lord love ye, he'd take 'arf a day to jog up there on such feet as he's got left after long wear and tear, an' there ain't no liftin' 'im into a cart nohow. Sez he to me: 'I'll see the little gel wot I used to know, and I'll tell 'er as 'ow the Five Sisters be chalked, an' she'll listen to me—you see if she don't!' I was rather took with the idee myself, but I sez, sez I: 'Let alone, Josey,—you be old as Methusaleh, and you can't get up to the Manor nohow; let Passon try what he can do wi' Leach,'—and now you've been and done your best, and can't do nothin', why we must give it up altogether."

Walden walked up and down, his hands loosely clasped behind his back, lost in thought.

"We won't give it up altogether, Bainton," he said; "We'll try and find some other way——"

"There's goin' to be another way," declared Bainton significantly; "There's trouble brewin' in the village, an' m'appen when Oliver Leach gets up to the woods to-morrow mornin' he'll find a few ready to meet 'im!"

Walden stopped abruptly.

"What do you mean?"

"'Tain't for me to say;" and Bainton pretended to be very busy in pulling up one or two plantains from the lawn; "But I tells ye true, Passon, the Five Sisters ain't goin' to be laid low without a shindy!"

John's eyes sparkled. He scented battle, and was not by any means displeased.

"This is Tuesday, isn't it?" he asked abruptly; "This is the day Miss Vancourt has arranged to return?"

"It is so, sir," replied Bainton; "and it's believed the arrangements 'olds good—for change 'er mind as a woman will, 'er 'osses an' groom's arrived—and a dog as large as they make 'em, which 'is name is Plato."

Walden gave a slight gesture of annoyance. Here was a fresh cause of antipathy to the approaching Miss Vancourt. No one but a careless woman, devoid of all taste and good

feeling, would name a dog after the greatest of Greek philosophers!

"Plato's a good name," went on Bainton meditatively, unconscious of the view his master was taking of that name in his own mind; "I've 'eard it somewheres before, though I couldn't tell just where. And it's a fine dog. I was up at the Manor this mornin' lookin' round the grounds, just to see 'ow they'd been a-gettin' on—and really it isn't so bad considerin', and I was askin' a question or two of Spruce, and he showed me the dog lyin' on the steps of the Manor, lookin' like a lion's baby snoozin' in the sun, and waitin' as wise as ye like for his mistress. He don't appear at all put out by new faces or new grounds—he's took to the place quite nat'ral."

"You saw Spruce early, then?"

"Yes, sir, I see Spruce, and arter 'ollerin' 'ard at 'im for 'bout ten minutes, he sez, sez he, as gentle as a child sez he: 'Yes, the Five Sisters is a-comin' down to-morrow mornin', and we's all to be there a quarter afore six with ropes and axes.'"

John started walking up and down again.

"When is Miss Vancourt expected?" he enquired.

"At tea-time this arternoon," replied Bainton. "The train arrives at Riversford at three o'clock, if so be it isn't behind its time,—and if the lady gets a fly from the station, which if she ain't ordered it afore, m'appen she won't get it, she'll be 'ere 'bout four."

Instinctively Walden glanced at his watch. It was just two o'clock. Another hour and the antipathetic 'Squire-ess' would be actually on her way to the village! He heaved a short sigh. Forebodings of evil infected the air,—impending change, disturbing and even disastrous to St. Rest suggested itself troublously to his mind. Arguing inwardly with himself, he presently began to think that notwithstanding all his attempts to live a Christian life, after the manner Christianly, he was surely becoming a very selfish and extremely narrow-minded man! He was unreasonably, illogically vexed at the return of the heiress of Abbot's Manor; and why? Why, chiefly because he would no longer be able to walk at liberty

in Abbot's Manor gardens and woods,—because there would be another personality perhaps more dominant than his own in the little village, and because—yes!—because he had a particular aversion to women of fashion, such as Miss Vancourt undoubtedly must be, to judge from the brief exhibition of her wardrobe which, through the guilelessness of Mrs. Spruce, had been displayed before his reluctant eyes.

These objections were after all, so he told himself, really rooted in masculine selfishness,—the absorbing selfishness of old bachelorhood, which had grown round him like a shell, shutting him out altogether from the soft influences of feminine attraction,—so much so indeed that he had even come to look upon his domestic indoor servants as obliging machines rather than women,—machines which it was necessary to keep well oiled with food and wages, but which could scarcely be considered as entering into his actual life more than the lawn-mower or the roasting-jack. Yet he was invariably kind to all his dependants,—invariably thoughtful of all their needs,—nevertheless he maintained a certain aloofness from them, not only because he was by nature reserved, but because he judged reserve necessary in order to uphold respect. In sickness or trouble, no one could be more quietly helpful or consolatory than he; and in the company of children he threw off all restraint and was as a child himself in the heartiness and spontaneity of his mirth and good-humour,—but with all women, save the very aged and matronly, he generally found himself at a loss, uncertain what to say to them, and equally uncertain as to how far he might accept or believe what they said to him. The dark eyes of a sparkling brunette embarrassed him as much as the dreamy blue orbs of a lily-like blonde,—they were curious dazzlements that got into his way at times, and made him doubtful as to whether any positive sincerity ever could or ever would lurk behind such bewildering brief flashes of light which appeared to shine forth without meaning, and vanish again without result. And in various ways,—he now began to think,—he must certainly have grown inordinately, outrageously selfish! —his irritation at the prospective return of Miss Vancourt,

proved it. He determined to brace himself together and put the lurking devil of egotism down.

"Put it down!" he said inwardly and with sternness,—"put it down—trample it under foot, John, my boy! The Lady of the Manor is perhaps sent here to try your patience and prove the stuff that is in you! She is no child,—she is twenty-seven years of age—a full grown woman,—she will have her ways, just as you have yours,—she will probably rub every mental and moral hair on the skin of your soul awry,—but that is really just what you want, John,—you do indeed! You want something more irritating than Sir Morton Pippitt's senile snobberies to keep you clean of an overgrowth or an undergrowth of fads! Your powers of endurance are about to be put to the test, and you must come out strong, John! You must not allow yourself to become a querulous old fellow because you cannot always do exactly as you like!"

He smiled genially at his own mental scolding of himself, and addressing Bainton once more, said:

"I shall probably write a note to Miss Vancourt this afternoon, and send you up with it. I shall tell her all about the Five Sisters, and ask her to give orders that the cutting down of the trees may be delayed till she has seen them for herself. But don't say anything about this in the village," here he paused a moment, and then spoke with greater emphasis—"I don't want to interfere with anything anybody else may have on hand. Do you understand? We must save the old beeches somehow. I will do my best, but I may fail; Miss Vancourt may not read my letter, or if she does, she may not be disposed to attend to it; it is best that all ways and means should be tried,——"

He broke off,—but his eyes met Bainton's in a mutual flash of understanding.

"You're a straight man, Passon, and no mistake!" observed Bainton with a slow smile; "No beatin' about the bush in the likes o' you! Lord, Lord! What a mussy we ain't saddled with a poor snuffling, addle-pated, whimperin' man o' God like we 'ad afore you come 'ere—what found all 'is dooty an'

pleasure in dinin' with Sir Morton Pippitt up at the 'All! And when there was a man died, or a baby born, or some other sich like calamity in the village, he worn't never to 'and to 'elp,—but he would give a look in when it was all over, and then he sez, sez he: 'I'm sorry, my man, I wasn't 'ere to comfort ye, but I was up at the 'All.' And he did roll it round and round in his mouth like as 'twas a lump o' butter and 'oney—'up at the 'All'! Hor-hor-hor! It must ha' tasted sweet to 'im as we used to say,—and takin' into consideration that Sir Morton was a bone-melter by profession, we used to throw up the proverb 'the nearer the bone, the sweeter the meat'—not that it had any bearin' on the matter, but a good sayin's a good thing, and a proverb fits into a fancy sometimes better'n a foot into a shoe. But you ain't a snuffler, Passon! —and you ain't never been up at the 'All, nor wouldn't go if you was axed to, and that's one of the many things what makes you a gineral favourite,—it do reely now!"

Walden smiled, but forbore to continue conversation on this somewhat personal theme. He retired into his own study, there to concoct the stiffest, most clerical, and most formal note to Miss Vancourt that he could possibly devise. He had the very greatest reluctance to attempt such a task, and sat with a sheet of notepaper before him for some time, staring at it without formulating any commencement. Then he began: "The Rev. John Walden presents his compliments to Miss Vancourt, and begs to inform her——"

No, that would never do! 'Begs to inform her' sounded almost threatening. The Rev. John Walden might 'beg to inform her' that she had no business to wear pink shoes with high heels, for example. He destroyed one half sheet of paper, put the other half economically aside to serve as a stray leaflet for 'church memoranda,' and commenced in a different strain.

"Dear Madam,"

"Dear Madam"! He looked at the two words in some annoyance. They were very ugly. Addressed to a person who wore pink shoes, they seemed singularly abrupt. And if Miss Vancourt should chance to resemble in the least her

ancestress, Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt, they were wholly unsuitable. A creditor might write 'Dear Madam' to a customer in application for an outstanding bill,—but to Mary Elia Adelgisa one would surely begin,—Ah!—now how would one begin? He paused, biting the end of his penholder. Another half sheet of notepaper was wasted, and equally another half sheet devoted to 'church memoranda.' Then he began:

"Dear Miss Vancourt,"

At this, he threw down his pen altogether. Too familiar! By all the gods of Greece, whom he had almost believed in even while studying Divinity at Oxford, a great deal too familiar!

"It is just as if I knew her!" he said to himself in vexation; "And I don't know her! And what's more, I don't want to know her! If it were not for this business of the Five Sisters, I wouldn't go near her. Positively I wouldn't!"

A mellow chime from the old eight-day clock in the outer hall struck on the silence. Three o'clock! The train by which Miss Vancourt would arrive, was timed to reach Riversford station at three,—if it was not late, which it generally was. Nebbie, who had been snoozing peacefully near the study window in a patch of sunlight, suddenly rose, shook himself, and trotted out on to the lawn, sniffing the air with ears and tail erect. Walden watched him abstractedly.

"Perhaps he scents a future enemy in Miss Vancourt's dog, Plato!" And this whimsical idea made him smile. "He is quite intelligent enough. He is certainly more intelligent than I am this afternoon, for I cannot write even a commonplace ordinary note to a commonplace ordinary woman!" Here a sly brain-devil whispered that Miss Vancourt might possibly be neither commonplace nor ordinary,—but he put the suggestion aside with a 'Get thee behind me, Satan' inflexibility. "The fact is, I had better not write to her at all. I'll send Bainton with a verbal message; he is sure to give a quaint and pleasant turn to it,—he knew her father, and I didn't;—it will be much better to send Bainton."

Having made this resolve, his brow cleared, and he was more satisfied. Tearing up the last half sheet of wasted note-

paper he had spoilt in futile attempts to address the Lady of the Manor, he laughed at his failures.

"Even if it were etiquette to use the old Roman form of correspondence, which some people think ought to be revived, it wouldn't do in this case," he said. "Imagine it! 'John Walden to Maryllia Vancourt,—Greeting!' How unutterably, how stupendously ridiculous it would look!"

He shut all his writing materials in his desk, and following Nebbie out to the lawn, seated himself with a volume of Owen Meredith in his hand. He was soon absorbed. Yet every now and again his thoughts strayed to the Five Sisters, and with persistent fidelity of detail his mind's eye showed him the grassy knoll so soft to the tread, where the doomed trees stood proudly and gracefully, clad just at this season all in a glorious panoply of young green,—where, as the poet whose tender word melodies he was reading might have said of the surroundings:

"For moisture of sweet showers,
All the grass is thick with flowers."

"Yes, I shall send Bainton up to the Manor with a civil message," he mused—"and he can—and certainly will—add anything else to it he likes. Of course the lady may be offended,—some women take offence at anything—but I don't much care if she is. My conscience will not reproach me for having warned her of the impending destruction of one of the most picturesque portions of her property. But personally, I shall not write to her, nor will I go to see her. I shall have to pay a formal call, of course, in a week or two,—but I need not go inside the Manor for that. To leave my card, as minister of the parish, will be quite sufficient."

He turned again to the volume in his hand. His eyes fell casually on a verse in the poem of 'Resurrection':

"The world is filled with folly and sin;
And Love must cling where it can, I say,—
—For Beauty is easy enough to win,
But one isn't loved every day."

He sighed involuntarily. Then to banish an unacknowledged regret, he began to criticise his author.

"If the world and the ambitions of diplomatic service had not stepped in between Lord Lytton and his muse, he would have been a fine poet," he said half aloud;—"A pity he was not born obscurely and in poverty—he would have been wholly great, instead of as now, merely greatly gifted. He missed his true vocation. So many of us do likewise. I often wonder whether I have missed mine?"

But this idea brooked no consideration. He knew he had not mistaken his calling. He was the very man for it. Many of his 'cloth' might have taken a lesson from him in the whole art of unselfish ministration to the needs of others. But with all his high spiritual aim, he was essentially human, and pleasantly conscious of his own failings and obstinacies. He did not hold himself as above the weaker brethren, but as one with them, and of them. And through the steady maintenance of this mental attitude, he found himself able to participate in ordinary emotions, ordinary interests and ordinary lives with more than the usual sympathy displayed by the ministers of small and outlying parishes in the concerns of the people committed to their charge. It is not too much to say that though he was in himself distinctly reserved and apart from the majority of average men, the quiet exercise of his influence over the village of St. Rest had resulted in so attracting and fastening the fibres of love and confidence in all the hearts about him to his own, that anything of serious harm occurring to himself, would have been considered in the light of real fatality and ruin to the whole community. When a clergyman can succeed in establishing such complete trust and sympathy between himself and his parishioners, there can be no question of his fitness for the high vocation to which he has been ordained. When, on the contrary, one finds a village or town where the inhabitants are split up into small and quarrelsome sects, and are more or less in a state of objective ferment against the minister who should be their ruling head, the blame is presumably more with the minister than with those

who dispute his teaching, inasmuch as he must have fallen far below the expected standard in some way or other, to have thus incurred general animosity.

"If all fails," mused Walden presently, his thoughts again reverting to the Five Sisters' question,—"If Bainton does his errand awkwardly,—if the lady will not see him,—if any one of the thousand things does happen that are quite likely to happen, and so spoil all chance of interceding with Miss Vancourt to spare the trees,—why then I will go myself to-morrow morning to the scene of intended massacre before six o'clock. I will be there before an axe is lifted! And if Bainton meant anything at all by his hint, others will be there too! Yes!—I shall go,—in fact it will be my duty to go in case of a row."

A smile showed itself under his silver-brown moustache. The idea of a row seemed not altogether unpleasant to him. He stooped and patted his dog playfully.

"Nebuchadnezzar!" he said, with mock solemnity; whereat Nebbie, lying at his feet, opened one eye, blinked it lazily and wagged his tail—"Nebuchadnezzar, I think our presence will be needed to-morrow morning at an early hour, in attendance on the Five Sisters! Do you hear me, Nebuchadnezzar?" Again Nebbie blinked. "Good! That wink expresses understanding. We shall have to be there, in case of a row."

Nebbie yawned, stretched out his paws, and closed both eyes in peaceful slumber. It was a beautiful afternoon;—'sufficient for the day was the evil thereof' according to Nebbie. The Reverend John turned over a few more pages of Owen Meredith, and presently came to the conclusion that he would go punting. The decision was no sooner arrived at than he prepared to carry it out. Nebbie awoke with a start from his doze to see his master on the move, and quickly trotted after him across the lawn to the river. Here, the sole occupant of the shining stream was a maternal swan, white as a cloud on the summit of Mont Blanc, floating in stately ease up and down the water, carrying her young brood

of cygnets on her back, under the snowy curve of her arching wings. Walden unchained the punt and sprang into it,—Nebbie dutifully following,—and then divested himself of his coat. He was just about to take the punting pole in hand, when Bainton's figure suddenly emerged from the shrubbery.

"Off on the wild wave, Passon, are ye?" he observed,—"Well, it's a fine day for it! M'appen you ain't seen the corpses of four rats anywhere around? No? Then I 'spect their lovin' relations must ha' been and ate 'em up, which may be their partikler way of doin' funerals. I nabbed 'em all last night in new traps of my own invention. Mebbe the lilies will be all the better for their loss. I'll be catchin' some more this evenin'. Lord! Passon, if you was to 'old out offers of a shillin' a head, the rats 'ud be gone in no time,—an' the lilies too!"

Walden absorbed in getting his punt out, only smiled and nodded acquiescingly.

"The train must ha' been poonctual," went on Bainton, staring stolidly at the shining water. "Amazin' poonctual for once in its life. For a one 'oss fly, goin' at a one 'oss fly pace, 'as jes' passed through the village, and is jiggitin' up to the Manor this very minute. I s'pose Miss Vancourt's inside it."

Walden paused,—punt-pole in hand.

"Yes, I suppose she is," he rejoined. "Come to me at six o'clock, Bainton. I shall want you."

"Very good, sir!"

The pole splashed in the water,—the punt shot out into the clear stream,—Nebbie gave two short barks, as was his custom when he found himself being helplessly borne away from dry land,—and in a few seconds Walden had disappeared round one of the bends of the river. Bainton stood ruminating for a minute.

"Jest a one 'oss fly, goin' at a one 'oss fly pace!" he repeated, slowly;—"It's a cheap way of comin' 'ome to one's father's 'Alls—jest in a one 'oss fly! She might ha' ordered a kerridge an' pair by telegram, an' dashed it up in fine style,

but a one 'oss fly! It do take the edge off a 'ome-comin'!—it do reely now."

And with a kind of short grunt at the vanity and disappointment of human expectations, he went his way to the kitchen garden, there to 'chew the cud of sweet and bitter memory' over the asparagus beds, which were in a highly promising condition.

CHAPTER VIII

THE one-horse fly, going at a one-horse fly pace, had made its way with comfortable jaunting slowness from Riversford to St. Rest, its stout, heavy-faced driver being altogether unconscious that his fare was no less a personage than Miss Vancourt, the lady of the Manor. When a small, girlish person, clad in a plain, close-fitting garb of navy-blue serge, and wearing a simple yet coquettish dark straw hat to match, accosted him at the Riversford railway station with a brief, 'Cab, please,' and sprang into his vehicle, he was a trifle sulky at being engaged in such a haphazard fashion by an apparently insignificant young female who had no luggage, not so much as a handbag.

"Wheer be you a-goin'?" he demanded, turning his bull neck slowly round—"I baint partikler for a far journey."

"Aren't you?" and the young lady smiled. "You must drive me to St. Rest,—Abbot's Manor, please!"

The heavy-faced driver paused, considering. Should he perform the journey, or should he not? Perhaps it would be wisest to undertake the job,—there was the 'Mother Huff' at the end of the journey, and Roger Buggins was a friend of his. Yes,—he would take the risk of conveying the humbly-clad female up to the Manor; he had heard rumours that the old place was once again to be inhabited, and that the mistress of it was daily expected;—this person in the blue serge was probably one of her messengers or retainers.

"My fare's ten shillings," he observed, still peering round distrustfully; "It's a good seven mile up hill and down dale."

"All right!" responded the young woman, cheerfully; "You shall have ten shillings. Only please begin to go, won't you?"

This request was accompanied by an arch smile, and a flash of blue eyes from under the dark straw hat brim. Whereat the cumbrous Jehu was faintly moved to a responsive grin.

"She ain't bad-looking, neither!" he muttered to himself,—and he was in a somewhat better humour when at last he condescended to start. His vehicle was a closed one, and though he fully expected his passenger would put her head out of the window, when the horse was labouring up-hill, and entreat him to go faster,—which habit he had found by experience was customary to woman in a one-horse fly,—nothing of the kind happened on this occasion. The person in the blue serge was evidently both patient and undemonstrative. Whether the horse crawled or slouched, or trotted,—whether the fly dragged, or bumped, or jolted, she made no sign. When St. Rest was reached at last, and the driver whipped his steed into a semblance of spirit, and drove through the little village with a clatter, two or three people came to the doors of their cottages and looked at the vehicle scrutinisingly, wondering whether its occupant was, or was not Miss Vancourt. But a meaning wink from the sage on the box intimated that they need not trouble themselves,—the 'fare' was no one of the least importance.

Presently, the fine old armorial gates of the drive which led up to Abbot's Manor were reached,—they were set wide open, this having been done according to Mrs. Spruce's orders. A woman at the lodge came hastily out, but the cab had passed her before she had time to see who was in it. Up through the grand avenue of stately oaks and broad-branching elms, whose boughs, rich with the budding green, swayed in the light wind with a soft rustling sound as of sweeping silks on velvet, the unostentatious vehicle jogged slowly,—it was a steady ascent all the way, and the driver was duly considerate of his animal's capabilities. At last came the turn in the long approach,

which showed the whole width of the Manor, with its ancient rose-brick frontage and glorious oaken gables shining in the warm afternoon sunlight,—the old Tudor courtyard spreading before it, its grey walls and paving stones half hidden in a wilderness of spring blossom. Here, too, the gates were open, and the one-horse fly made its lumbering and awkward entrance within, drawing up with a jerk at the carved portico. The young person in blue serge jumped out, purse in hand.

"Ten shillings, I think?" she said; but before the driver could answer her, the great iron-clamped door of the Manor swung open, and a respectable retainer in black stood on the threshold.

"Oh, will you pay the driver, please?" said the young lady, addressing this functionary; "He says his fare is ten shillings. I daresay he would like an extra five shillings for himself as well," and she smiled—"Here it is!"

She handed the money to the personage in black, who was no other than the former butler to Sir Morton Pippitt, now at the Manor on 'temp'ry service,' and who in turn presented it with an official stateliness to the startled fly-man, who was just waking up to the fact that his fare, whom he had considered as a person of no account whatever, was the actual mistress of the Manor.

"Drive out to the left of the court," said the butler imperatively; "Reverse way to which you entered."

The submissive Jehu prepared to obey. The young person in blue serge smiled up at him.

"Good-afternoon!" said she.

"Same to you, mum!" he replied, touching his cap; "And thank ye kindly!"

Whereat, his stock of eloquence being exhausted, he whipped up his steed to a gallop and departed in haste for the 'Mother Huff,' full of eagerness to relate the news of Miss Vancourt's arrival, further embellished by the fact that he had himself driven her up from the station, 'all unbeknown like.'

Miss Vancourt herself, meanwhile, stepped into her ancestral

halls, and stood for a moment, silent, looking round her with a wistful, almost pathetic earnestness.

"Tea is served in the morning-room, Madam," said the butler, respectfully, all the time wondering whether this slight, childlike-looking creature was really Miss Vancourt, or some young friend of hers sent as an advance herald of her arrival. "Mrs. Spruce thought you would find it comfortable there."

"Mrs. Spruce!" exclaimed the girl, eagerly; "Where is she?"

"Here, ma'am—here, my lady," said a quavering voice—and Mrs. Spruce, presenting quite a comely and maternal aspect in her best black silk gown, and old-fashioned cap, with lace lappets, such as the late Squire had always insisted on her wearing, came forward curtseying nervously.

"I hope, ma'am, you've had a pleasant journey——"

But her carefully prepared sentence was cut short by a pair of arms being flung suddenly round her, and a fresh face pressed against her own.

"Dear Mrs. Spruce! I am so glad to see you! You knew me when I was quite a little thing, didn't you? And you knew my father, too! You were very fond of my father, weren't you? I am sure you were! You must try to be fond of me now!"

Never, as Mrs. Spruce was afterwards wont to declare, had she been so 'took back,' as by the unaffected spontaneity and sweetness of this greeting on the part of the new mistress, whose advent she had so greatly feared. She went, to quote her own words, 'all of a fluster like, and near busted out cryin'. It was like a dear lovin' little child comin' 'ome, and made me feel that queer you might have knocked me down with a soap-bubble!'

Whatever the worthy woman's feelings were, and however much the respectable butler, whose name was Primmins, might have been astonished in his own stately mind at Miss Vancourt's greeting of her father's old servant, Miss Vancourt herself was quite unconscious of any loss of dignity on her own part.

"I am so glad!" she repeated; "It's like finding a friend at home to find you, Spruce! I had quite forgotten what you looked like, but I begin to remember now—you were always nice and kind, and you always managed so well, didn't you? Yes, I'm sure you did! The man said tea was in the morning-room. You come and pour it out for me, like a dear old thing! I'm going to live alone in my own home now for always,—for always!" she repeated, emphatically; "Nobody shall ever take me away from it again!"

She linked her arm confidingly in that of Mrs. Spruce, who for once was too much astonished to speak,—Miss Vancourt was so entirely different to the chill and reserved personage her imagination had depicted, that she was quite at a loss how to look or what to say.

"Is this the way?" asked Maryllia, stepping lightly past the stuffed knight in armour; "Yes? I thought it was! I begin to remember everything now! Oh, how I wish I had never gone away from this dear old home!"

She entered the morning-room, guiding Mrs. Spruce, rather than being guided by her,—for as that worthy woman averred to Primmins at supper that self-same night: "I was so all in a tremble and puspration with 'er 'oldin' on to my arm and takin' me round, that I was like the man in the Testymen what had dumb devils,—and scarcely knew what ground my feet was a-fallin' on!" The cheerful air of welcome which pervaded this charming, sunny apartment, with its lattice windows fronting the wide stretch of velvety lawn, terrace and park-land, delighted Maryllia, and she loosened her hold on Mrs. Spruce's arm with a little cry of pleasure, as a huge magnificently coated Newfoundland dog rose from his recumbent position near the window, and came to greet her with slow and expansive waggings of his great plumy tail.

"Plato, my beauty!" she exclaimed; "How do you like Abbot's Manor, boy? Eh? Quite at home, aren't you! Good dog! Isn't he a king of dogs?" And she turned her smiling face on Mrs. Spruce. "A real king! I bought him because he was so big! Weren't you frightened when you

saw such a monster?—and didn't you think he would bite everybody on the least provocation? But he wouldn't, you know! He's a perfect darling—as gentle as a lamb! He would kill anyone that wanted to hurt me—oh yes, of course!—that's why I love him!"

And she patted the enormous creature's broad head tenderly.

"He's my only true friend!" she continued; "Money wouldn't buy *his* fidelity!" Here, glancing at Mrs. Spruce, she laughed merrily. "Dear Mrs. Spruce! You *do* look so uncomfortable!—so—so warm! It *is* warm, isn't it? Make me some tea!—tea cools one, they say, though it's hot to drink at first. We'll talk afterwards!"

Mrs. Spruce, with inaudible murmurings, hastened to the tea-tray, and tried to compose her agitated nerves by bringing her attention to bear on the silver tea-kettle which Primmins had just brought in, and in which the water was beginning to bubble, in obedience to the newly-kindled flame of the spirit-lamp beneath.

Maryllia, meanwhile, stepped out on the grass terrace in front of the window, with the dog Plato at her side, and looked long and earnestly at the fair stretch of woodland scenery before her. While she thus stood absorbed, Mrs. Spruce stole covert glances at her with increased wonder and bewilderment. She looked much younger than her twenty-seven years,—her child-like figure and face portrayed her as about eighteen, not more. She stood rather under than over the medium height of woman,—yet she gave the impression of being taller than she actually was, owing to the graceful curve of her arched neck, which rose from her shoulders with a daintily-proud poise, marking her demeanour as exceptional and altogether different from that of ordinary women. Her back being turned to Mrs. Spruce for the moment, that sagacious dame decided that she was 'real stately, for all that she was small,' and also noted that her hair, coiled loosely in a thick knot, which pushed itself with rebellious fulness beyond the close-fitting edge of the dark straw-hat she wore, was of a warm auburn gold, rippling here and there into shades of darker brown. Suddenly, with a

decided movement, she turned from the terrace and re-entered the morning-room.

"Tea ready?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am!—yes, miss—my lady—it's just made—perhaps it's best to let it draw a bit——"

"I don't like it strong!" said Maryllia, sitting down, and leisurely taking off her hat; "And you mustn't call me 'my lady.' I'm not the daughter of an earl, or the wife of a knight. If I were Scotch, I might say 'I'm McIntosh of McIntosh'; or some other Mac of Mac,—but being English, I'm Vancourt of Vancourt! And you must call me 'Miss,' till I become 'Ma'am.' I don't want to bear any unnecessary dignities before my time! In fact, I think you'd better call me Miss Maryllia, as you used to do when my father was alive."

"Very well, ma'am—miss—Miss Maryllia," faltered Mrs. Spruce, fumbling distractedly with the tea-things, and putting cream and sugar recklessly into three or four cups without thinking; "There! Really, I don't know what I am a-doin' of—do you like cream and sugar, my dear?—beggin' your parding—Miss Maryllia?"

"Yes, I like cream and sugar both," replied the young lady, with a mirthful gleam in her eyes, as she noted the old housekeeper's confusion; "But don't spoil the tea with either! If you put too much cream, you will make the tea cold,—if you put too much sugar, you will make it syrupy,—you must arrive at the *juste milieu* in a cup of tea! I am *very* particular!"

Poor Mrs. Spruce grew warmer and redder in the face than ever. What was the '*juste milieu*'? Often and often afterwards did she puzzle over that remarkable phrase.

"I think," continued Maryllia, with a dimpling smile, "if you put one lump of sugar in the cup and two brimming teaspoonfuls of cream, it will be exactly right!"

Gladly, and with relief, Mrs. Spruce obeyed these explicit instructions, and handed her new mistress the desired refreshment with assiduous and respectful care.

"You are a dear!" said Maryllia, lazily taking the cup from

her hand; "Just the kindest and nicest of persons! And good-tempered? I am sure you are good-tempered, aren't you?"

"Pretty well so, Miss," responded Mrs. Spruce, now gaining courage to look at the fair smiling face opposite her own, more squarely and openly; "Leastways, I've been told I keeps my 'ead under any amount of kitchen jawin'. For, as you may believe me, in a kitchen where there's men as well as women, an' a servants' 'All leadin' straight through from the kitchen, jawin' there is and jawin' there must be, and such bein' the Lord's will, we must put up with it. But it wants a 'ead to keep things straight, and I generally arranges pretty well, though I'll not deny but I'm a bit flustered to-day,—howsomever, it will soon be all right, and anythink that's wrong, Miss, if you will be so good as to tell me——"

"I will!" said Maryllia, sweetly; and she leaned back in her chair, whimsically surveying the garrulous old dame with eyes which Mrs. Spruce then and there discovered to be 'the most beautiful blue eyes ever seen,'—"I will tell you all I do like, and all I don't like. I'm sure we shall get on well together. The tea is perfect,—and this room is exquisite. In fact, everything is delightful, and I'm so happy to be in my own home once more! I wish I had never left it!"

Her eyes darkened suddenly, and she sighed. Mrs. Spruce watched her in submissive silence, realising as she gazed that Miss Maryllia was 'a real beauty and no mistake.' Why and how she came to that conclusion, she could not very well have explained. Her ideas of feminine loveliness were somewhat hazy and restricted. She privately considered her own girl, Kitty, 'the handsomest lass in all the country-side' and she had been known to bitterly depreciate what she called 'the pink and white dolly-face' of Susie Prescott, the acknowledged young belle of the village. But there was an indefinable air of charm about her new lady which was quite foreign to all her experience,—a bewildering grace and ease of manner arising from high education and social cultivation, that confused her and robbed her of all her usual self-

sufficiency; and for once in her life she checked her customary volubility and decided that it was perhaps best to say as little as possible till she saw exactly how things were going to turn out. Miss Maryllia was very kind,—but who could tell whether she was not also capricious? There was something slightly quizzical as well as sweet in her smile,—something subtle —something almost mysterious. She had greeted her father's old servant as affectionately as a child,—but her enthusiasm might be only temporary. So Mrs. Spruce vaguely reflected as she stood with her hands folded on her apron, waiting for the next word. That next word came with a startling suddenness.

"Oh, you wicked Spruce! How could you!"

And Maryllia, springing up from her chair, made a bound to the opposite corner of the room, where there was a tall vase filled with peacocks' feathers. Gathering all these in her hand, she flourished them dramatically in the old housekeeper's face.

"The most unlucky things in the world!" she exclaimed; "Peacocks' feathers! How could you allow them to be in this room on the very day of my return! It's dreadful!—quite dreadful!—you know it is! Nothing is quite so awful as a peacock's feather!"

Mrs. Spruce stared, gasped and blinked,—her hand involuntarily wandered to her side in search for convenient 'spasms.'

"They've always been 'ere, Miss," she stammered; "I 'adn't no idee as 'ow you wouldn't like them, though to tell the truth, I 'ave 'eard somethin' about their bein' onlucky——"

"Unlucky! I should think so!" replied Maryllia, holding the objectionable plumes as far away from herself as possible,—"No wonder we've been unfortunate, if these feathers were always in the old house! No wonder everything went wrong! I must break the spell at once and for ever. Are there more of these horrible 'witch-eyes' in any of the rooms?"

Poor Mrs. Spruce made a great effort to cudgel her memory. She was affected by 'a palpitation,' as she expressed

it. There was her newly-arrived mistress confronting her with the authoritative air of a young empress, holding the bunch of glittering peacocks' plumes aloft, like a rod uplifted for summary chastisement, and asking her to instantly remember whether there were any more "horrible witch-eyes" about. Mrs. Spruce had never before heard such a term applied to the tail-sheddings of the imperial fowl,—but she never forgot it, and never afterwards saw a peacock's feather without a qualm.

"I couldn't say, Miss; I'm not sure—" she answered flutteringly; "But I'll have every 'ole and corner searched to-morrow——"

"No, to-night!" said Maryllia, with determination; "I will not sleep in the house if *one* peacock's feather remains in it! There!" Her brows were bent tragically;—in another moment she laughed; "Take them away!" she continued, picking up Mrs. Spruce's apron at the corners and huddling all the glittering plumage into its capacious folds; "Take them all away! And go right through the house, and collect every remaining feather you can find—and then—and then——"

Here she paused dubiously. "You mustn't burn them, you know! That would be unluckier still!"

"Lor! Would it now, Miss? I never should 'ave thought it!" murmured Mrs. Spruce plaintively, grasping her apronful of 'horrible witch-eyes'; "What on earth shall I do with them?"

Maryllia considered. Very pretty she looked at that moment, with one small finger placed meditatively on her lips, which were curved close like a folded rosebud. "You must either bury them, or drown them!" she said at last, with the gravest decision; "If you drown them, you must tie them to a stone, so that they will not float. If you bury them, you must dig ten feet deep! You must really! If you don't, they will all come up again, and the eyes will be all over the place, haunting you!" Here she broke into the merriest little laugh possible. "Poor Spruce! You do look so miserable! See here—I'll tell you what to do! Pack them all in a box, and I

will send them to my aunt Emily! She loves them! She likes to see them stuck all over the drawing-room. They're never unlucky to her. She has a fellow-feeling for peacocks; there is a sort of affinity between herself and them! Pack up every feather you can find, Spruce! The box must go to-night by parcels' post. Address to Mrs. Fred Vancourt, at the Langham Hotel. She's staying there just now. Will you be sure to send them off to-night?"

She held up her little white hand entreatingly, and her blue eyes, wonderfully sweet and childlike, yet grave and passionate, looked straight into the elder woman's wrinkled apple face.

"When she looked at me like that, I'd a gone barefoot to kingdom-come for her!" Mrs. Spruce afterwards declared to some of her village intimates—"And as for the peacocks' feathers, I'd a scrubbed through the 'ole 'ouse from top to bottom afore I'd a let one be in it!"

To Maryllia, she said:

"You may take my word for it, Miss! They'll all go out of the 'ouse 'fore seven o'clock. I'll send them myself to the post."

"Thank you, *so* much!" said Maryllia, with a comical little sigh of relief. "And now, Spruce, I will go to my bedroom and lie down for an hour. I'm just a little tired. Have you managed to get a maid for me?"

"Well, Miss, there's jest a gel—she don't know anythink much, but she's 'andy and willin' and 'umble, and quick with her needle, and tidy at foldin', and got a good character. She's the best I could do, Miss. Her name is Nancy Pyrle—I'll send her to you directly."

"Yes, do!" answered Miss Vancourt, with a little yawn; "And show me to my rooms;—you prepared the ones I told you—my mother's rooms?"

"Yes, Miss," answered Mrs. Spruce in subdued accents; "I've made them all fresh and sweet and clean; but of course the furniture is left jest as it was when the Squire locked 'em all up after he lost his lady——"

Maryllia said nothing, but followed the housekeeper upstairs,

the great dog Plato in attendance on her steps. On reaching the bedroom, hung with faded rose silk hangings, and furnished with sixteenth century oak, she looked at everything with a curious wistfulness and reverence. Approaching the dressing-table, she glanced at her own reflection in the mirror; but fair as the reflection was that glanced back at her, she gave it no smile. She was serious and absorbed, and her eyes were clouded with a sudden mist of tears. Mrs. Spruce took the opportunity to slip away with her collection of peacocks' feathers, and descended in haste to the kitchen, where for some time the various orders she issued caused much domestic perturbation, and fully expressed the chaotic condition of her own mind. The maid, Nancy Pyrle, was hustled off to 'wait on Miss Vancourt upstairs, and don't be clumsy with your 'ands, whatever you do!'—Primmins, the butler, was sent to remove the tea-things from the morning-room,—at which command he turned round somewhat indignantly, asking 'who are you a-orderin' of; don't you think I know my business?'—Spruce himself, unhappily coming by chance to the kitchen door to ask if it was really true that Miss Vancourt had arrived, was shrilly told to 'go along and mind his own business,'—and so it happened that when Bainton appeared, charged with the Reverend John Walden's message concerning the Five Sisters, he might as well have tried to obtain an unprepared audience with the King, as to see or speak with the Lady of the Manor. Miss Vancourt had arrived—oh yes, she had certainly arrived, Mrs. Spruce told him, with much heat and energy; but she was tired and was lying down, and certainly could not be asked to see anyone, no matter what the business was. And to make things more emphatic, at the very time that Bainton was urging his cause, and Mrs. Spruce was firmly rejecting it, Nancy Pyrle came down from attendance on her mistress and said that Miss Vancourt was going to sleep a little, and did not wish to be disturbed till she rang her bell.

"Oh, and she's beautiful!" said Nancy, drawing a long breath,—"and so very kind! She showed me how to do all

she wanted—and was that patient and gentle! She says I'll make quite a good maid after a bit!"

"Well, I hope to the Lord you will!" said Mrs. Spruce with a sniff; "For it's a chance in a 'undred, comin' straight out of the village to a first situation with a lady like Miss Vancourt. And I 'ope you'll profit by it! And if you 'adn't taken the prize for needlework in the school, you wouldn't 'ave 'ad it, so now you sees what good it doos to serve your elders when you're young." Here she turned to Bainton, who was standing disconsolately half in and half out of the kitchen doorway. "I'm real sorry, Mr. Bainton, that you can't see our lady, more 'specially as you wishes to give a message from Passon Walden himself—but you jest go back and tell 'im 'ow it is;—Miss Vancourt is restin' and can't be disturbed nohow."

Bainton twirled his cap nervously in his hand.

"I s'pose no one couldn't say to her quiet-like as 'ow the Five Sisters be chalked?——"

Mrs. Spruce raised her fat hands with a gesture of dismay.

"Lor' bless the man!" she exclaimed; "D'ye think we're goin' to worrit Miss Vancourt with the likes o' that the very first evenin' she's set foot in 'er own 'ouse? Why, we dussn't! An' that there great dog Plato lyin' on guard outside 'er door! I've 'ad enough to-day with peacocks' feathers, let alone the Five Sisters! Besides, Oliver Leach is agent 'ere, and what he says is sure to be done. She won't worry 'erself about it,—and you may be pretty certain he won't be interfered with. You tell Passon Walden I'm real sorry, but it can't be 'elped."

Reluctantly, Bainton turned away. He was never much disposed for a discussion with Mrs. Spruce,—her mind was too illogical, and her tongue too persistent. Her allusion to peacocks' feathers was unintelligible to him, and he wondered whether 'anythink she's been an' took' had gone to her head. Anyway, his errand was foiled for the moment. But he was not altogether disheartened. He determined not to go back to Walden with his message quite undelivered.

"Where there's a will, there's a way!" he said to himself.

"I'll go and do a bit of shoutin' to Spruce,—deaf as he is, he's more reasonable-like than his old 'ooman!"

With this resolve, he went his way by a short-cut through Abbot's Manor gardens to a small thatched shelter in the woods, known as 'the foresters' hut,' where Spruce was generally to be found at about sunset, smoking a peaceful pipe, alone and well out of his wife's way.

Meanwhile, Maryllia Vancourt, lying wide awake on her bed in the long unused room that was to have been her mother's, experienced various chaotic sensations of mingled pleasure and pain. For the first time in her life of full womanhood she was alone,—independent,—free to come or go as she listed, with no one to gainsay her wishes, or place a check on her caprices. She had deliberately thrown off her aunt's protection; and with that action, had given up the wealth and luxury with which she had been lavishly surrounded ever since her father's death. For reasons of her own, which she considered sufficiently cogent, she had also resigned all expectations of being her aunt's heiress. She had taken her liberty, and was prepared to enjoy it. She had professed herself perfectly contented to live on the comparatively small patrimony secured to her by her father's will. It was quite enough, she said, for a single woman,—at any rate, she would make it enough.

And here she was, in her own old home,—the home of her childhood, which she was ashamed to think she had well-nigh forgotten. Since her fifteenth year she had travelled nearly all over the world; London, Paris, Vienna, New York, had each in turn been her 'home' under the guidance of her wealthy perambulating American relative; and in the brilliant vortex of an over-moneyed society, she had been caught and whirled like a helpless floating straw. Mrs. 'Fred' Vancourt, as her aunt was familiarly known to the press paragraphist, had spared no pains to secure for her a grand marriage,—and every possible advantage that could lead to that one culminating point, had been offered to her. She had been taught everything that could possibly add to her natural gifts of intelligence; she had been dressed exquisitely, taken about everywhere, and 'shown

off' to all the impecunious noblemen of Europe;—she had been flattered, praised, admired, petted and generally spoilt, and had been proposed to by 'eligible' gentlemen with every recurring season,—but all in vain. She had taken a singular notion into her head—an idea which her matter-of-fact aunt told her was supremely ridiculous. She wanted to be loved.

"Any man can ask a girl to marry him, if he has pluck and impudence!" she said; "Especially if the girl has money, or expectations of money, and is not downright deformed, repulsive and ill-bred. But proposals of marriage don't always mean love. I don't care a bit about being married,—but I do want to be loved—really loved!—I want to be 'dear to someone else' as Tennyson sings it,—not for what I *have*, but for what I *am*."

It was this curious, old-fashioned notion of wanting to be loved, that had estranged Maryllia from her wealthy American protectress. It had developed from mere fireside argument and occasional dissension, into downright feud, and its present result was self-evident. Maryllia had broken her social fetters, and had returned to her own rightful home in a state which, for her, considered by her past experience, was one of genteel poverty, but which was also one of glorious independence. And as she restfully reclined under the old rose silk hangings which were to have encanopied that perished beauty from which she derived her own fairness, she was conscious of a novel and soothing sense of calm. The rush and hurry and frivolity of society seemed put away and done with; through her open window she could hear the rustling of leaves and the singing of birds;—the room in which she found herself pleased her taste as well as her sentiment,—and though the faintest shadow of vague wonder crossed her mind as to what she would do with her time, now that she had gained her own way and was actually all alone in the heart of the country, she did not permit such a thought to trouble her peace. The grave tranquillity of the old house was already beginning to exert its influence on her always quick and perceptive mind,—the dear remembrance of her father whom she had idolised, and whose

sudden death had been the one awful shock of her life, came back to her now with a fresh and tender pathos. Little incidents of her childhood and of its affection, such as she thought she had forgotten, presented themselves one by one in the faithful recording cells of her brain,—and the more or less feverish and hurried life she had been compelled to lead under her aunt's command and chaperonage, began to efface itself slowly, like a receding coast-line from a departing vessel.

"It is home!" she said; "And I have not been in a home for years! Aunt Emily's houses were never 'home.' And this is *my* home—my very own; the home of our family for generations. I ought to be proud of it, and I *will* be proud of it! Even Aunt Emily used to say that Abbot's Manor was a standing proof of the stuck-up pride of the Vancourts! I'm sure I shall find plenty to do here. I can farm my own lands and live on the profits—if there are any!"

She laughed a little, and rising from the bed went to the window and leaned out. A large white clematis pushed its moonlike blossom up to her face, as though asking to be kissed, and a bright red butterfly danced dreamily up and down in the late sunbeams, now poising on the ivy and anon darting off again into the mild still air.

"It's perfectly lovely!" said Maryllia, with a little sigh of content; "And it is all my own!"

She drew her head in from the window and turned to her mirror.

"I'm getting old," she said, surveying herself critically, and with considerable disfavour;—"It's all the result of society 'pressure,' as they call it. There's a line here—and another there"—indicating the imaginary facial defects with a small tapering forefinger—"And I daresay I have some grey hairs, if I could only find them." Here she untwisted the coil at the back of her head and let it fall in a soft curling shower round her shoulders—"Oh, yes!—I daresay!" she went on, addressing her image in the glass; "You think it looks very pretty—but that is only an 'effect,' you know! It's like the advertisements the photographers do for the hairdressers:

'Hair-positively-forced-to-grow-in-six-weeks' sort of thing. Oh, what a dear old chime!" This, as she heard the ancient clock in the square turret which overlooked the Tudor courtyard give forth a mellow tintinnabulation. "What time is it, I wonder?" She glanced at the tiny trifle of a watch she had taken off and placed on her dressing-table. "Quarter past seven! I must have had a doze, after all. I think I will ring for Nancy Pyrle"—and she suited the action to the word; "I have not the least idea where my clothes are."

Nancy obeyed the summons with alacrity. She could not help a slight start as she saw her mistress, looking like 'the picture of an angel' as she afterwards described it, in her loose white dressing-gown, with all her hair untwisted and floating over her shoulders. She had never seen any human creature quite so lovely.

"Do you know where my dresses are, Nancy?" enquired Maryllia.

"Yes, Miss. Mrs. Spruce unpacked everything herself, and the dresses are all hanging in this wardrobe." Here Nancy went to the piece of furniture in question. "Which one shall I give you, Miss?"

Maryllia came to her side, and looked scrutinisingly at all the graceful Parisian and Viennese flimsies that hung in an orderly row within the wardrobe, uncertain which to take. At last she settled on an exceedingly simple white tea-gown, shaped after a Greek model, and wholly untrimmed, save for a small square gold band at the throat.

"This will do!" she decided; "Nobody's coming to dine; I shall be all alone——"

The thought struck her as quaint and strange. Nobody coming to dinner! How very odd! At Aunt Emily's there was always someone, or several someones, to dinner. To-night, she would dine all alone. Well! It would be a novel experience!

"Are there any nice people living about here?" she asked Nancy, as that anxious young woman carefully divested her of her elegant dressing-gown; "People I should like to know?"

"Oh, I don't think so, Miss," replied Nancy, quite frankly, watching in wonder the dexterity and grace with which her mistress swept up all her hair into one rich twist and knotted it with two big tortoiseshell hairpins at the back of her head. "There's Sir Morton Pippitt at Badsworth Hall, three miles from here——"

Maryllia laughed gaily.

"Sir Morton Pippitt! What a funny name! Who is he?"

"Well, Miss, they do say he makes his money at bone-melting; but he's awful proud for all that—awful proud he is——"

"Well, I should think so!" said Maryllia, with much solemnity; "Bone-melting is a great business! Does he melt human bones, Nancy?"

"Oh, lor, Miss, no!" And Nancy laughed, despite herself; "Not that I've ever heard on—it's bones of animals he melts and turns into buttons and such-like."

"Man is an animal, Nancy," said Maryllia, sententiously, giving one or two little artistic touches to the loose waves of hair on her forehead; "Why should not *his* bones be turned into buttons? Why should *he* not be made useful? You may depend upon it, Nancy, human bones go into Sir Morton What's-his-name's stock-pot. I shouldn't wonder if he had left his own bones to his business in his will!

"'Imperial Cæsar dead and turned to clay,
May stop a hole to keep the wind away!'

That's so, Nancy! And is the gentleman who boils bones the only man about here one could ask to dinner?"

Nancy reflected.

"There's the Passon—" she began.

"Oh dear me!" exclaimed Maryllia, with a little shrug of impatience; "Worse than the bone-boiler!—a thousand times worse! There! That will do, Nancy! I'll stroll about till dinner's ready."

She left the room and descended the stairs, followed by the faithful Plato, and was soon to be seen by various retainers of

the curious and excited household, walking slowly up and down on the grass terrace in her flowing white draperies, the afterglow of the sinking sun shining on her gold-brown hair, and touching up little reddish ripples in it,—such ripples as were painted by the artist of Charles the Second's day when he brushed into colour and canvas the portrait of Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt. Primmins, late butler to the irascible Sir Morton Pippitt, was so taken with the sight of her that he then and there resolved his 'temp'ry service' should be life-long, if he could manage to please her; and little Kitty Spruce being permitted by her mother to peep at the 'new lady' through the staircase window, could only draw a long breath and ejaculate: "Oh! Ain't she lovely!" while she followed with eagerly admiring eyes the gossamer trail of Maryllia's white gown on the soft turf, and strained her ears to catch the sound of the sweet voice which suddenly broke out in a careless *chansonette*:

"Tu m'aimes, chérie?
Dites-moi!
Seulement un petit 'oui,'
Je demande à toi!
Le bonheur suprême
Vient quand on aime,
N'est-ce-pas chérie?
Oui'!"

"She's singin' to herself!" said the breathless Kitty, whispering to her mother; "Aint she jest smilin' and beautiful?"

"Well, I will own," replied Mrs. Spruce, "she's as different to the lady *I* expected as cheese from chalk, which they generally says chalk from cheese, howsomever, that don't matter. But if I don't mistake, she's got a will of 'er own, for all that she's so smilin' and beautiful as you says, Kitty; and now don't *you* go runnin' away with notions that you can dress like 'er or look like 'er,—for when once a gel of *your* make thinks she can imitate the fashions and the ways of a great lady,

she's done for, body and soul! *You* ain't goin' to wear white gowns and trail 'em up an' down on the grass, nor 'ave big dogs a-follerin' up an' down while you sings in a furrin langwidge to yerself; no, not if you was to read all the trashy story-books in the world—so you needn't think it. For there ain't no millionaires comin' arter you, as they doos in penny novels,—nor nothink else what's dished up in newspapers; so jes' wear your cotton frocks in peace, an' don't worry me with wantin' to look like Miss Maryllia, for you never won't look like 'er if ye tried till ye was dead! Remember that, now! The Lord makes a many women,—but now and again He turns out a few chice samples which won't bear copyin'. Miss Maryllia's one of them samples, and we must take 'er 'umbly with prayer and thanksgivin' as sich!"

CHAPTER IX

MARYLLIA'S first solitary dinner in the home of her ancestors passed off with tolerable success. She found something not altogether unpleasant in being alone after all. Plato was always an intelligent, well-behaved and dignified companion in his canine way, and the meal was elegantly served by Primmins, who waited on his new mistress with as much respect and zeal as if she had been a queen. A sense of authority and importance began to impress itself upon her as she sat at the head of her own table in her own dining-hall, with all the Vandykes and Holbeins and Gainsboroughs gazing placidly down upon her from their gilded frames, and the flicker of many wax candles in old silver sconces glancing upon the shields, helmets, rusty pikes and crossed swords that decorated the panelling of the walls between and above the pictures.

"Fancy! No gas and no electric light! It is simply charming!" she thought, "And so becoming to one's dress and complexion! Only there's nobody to see the becomingness. But I can soon remedy that. Lots of people will come down and stay here if I only ask them. There's one thing quite certain about society folk—they will always come where they can be lodged and boarded free! They call it country visiting, but it really means shutting up their houses, dismissing their servants, and generally economising on their housekeeping bills. I've seen *such* a lot of it!"

She heaved a little sigh over these social reminiscences, and finished her repast in meditative silence. She had not been

accustomed to much thinking, and to indulge in it at all for any length of time was actually a novelty. Her aunt had told her never to think, as it made the face serious, and developed lines on the forehead. And she had, under this kind of tutelage, become one of a brilliant, fashionable, dress-loving crowd of women, who spend most of their lives in caring for their complexions and counting their lovers. Yet every now and again, a wave of repugnance to such a useless sort of existence arose in her and made a stormy rebellion. Surely there was something nobler in life—something higher—something more useful and intelligent than the ways and manners of a physically and morally degenerate society?

It was a still calm evening, and the warmth of the sun all day had drawn such odours from the hearts of the flowers that the air was weighted with perfume when she wandered out again into her garden after dinner, and looked up wistfully at the gables of the Manor set clear against a background of dark blue sky patterned with stars. A certain gravity oppressed her. There was, after all, something just a little eerie in the on-coming of night in this secluded woodland place where she had voluntarily chosen to dwell all alone and unprotected, rather than lend herself to her aunt's match-making schemes.

"Of course," she argued with herself, "I need not stay here if I don't like it. I can get a paid companion and go travelling,—but, oh dear, I've had so much travelling!—or I can own myself in the wrong to Aunt Emily, and marry that wretch Roxmouth,—Oh no! I *could* not! I *will* not!"

She gave an impatient little stamp with her foot, and anon surveyed the old house with affectionate eyes.

"You shall be my rescue!" she said, kissing her hand playfully to the latticed windows,—"You shall turn me into an old-fashioned lady, fond of making jams and pickles, and preserves and herbal waters! I'll put away all the idiotic intrigues and silly fooling of modern society in one of your quaint oaken cupboards, and lock them all up with little bags of lavender to disinfect them! And I will wait for someone to come and find me out and love me; and if no one ever

comes——" Here she paused, then went on,—"If no one ever comes, why then—" and she laughed—"some man will have lost a good chance of marrying as true a girl as ever lived!—a girl who could love—ah!" And she stretched out her pretty rounded arms to the scented air. "*How* she could love if she were loved!"

The young moon here put in a shy appearance by showing a fleck of silver above the highest gable of the Manor.

"A little diamond peak,
No bigger than an unobservëd star,
Or tiny point of fairy scimitar;
Bright signal that she only stooped to tie
Her silver sandals ere deliciously
She bowed unto the heavens her timid head,
Slowly she rose as though she would have fled."

"There's no doubt," said Maryllia, "that this place is romantic! And romance is what I've been searching for all my life, and have never found except in books. Not so much in modern books as in the books that were written by really poetical and imaginative people sixty or seventy years ago. Nowadays, the authors that are most praised go in for what they call 'realism,'—and their realism is very *un*real, and very nasty. For instance, this garden,—these lovely trees,—this dear old house—all these are real—but much too romantic for a modern writer. He would rather describe a dusthole and enumerate every potato paring in it! And here am I —I'm real enough—but I'm not a bad woman—I haven't got what is euphoniously called 'a past,' and I don't belong to the right-down vicious company of 'Souls.' So I should never do for a heroine of latter-day fiction. I'm afraid I'm abnormal. It's dreadful to be abnormal! One becomes a 'neurotic,' like Lombroso, and all the geniuses. But suppose the world were full of merely normal people,—people who did nothing but eat and sleep in the most perfectly healthy and regular manner,—oh, what a bore it would be! There would be no pictures, no sculpture, no poetry, no music, no anything

worth living for. One *must* have a few ideas beyond food and clothing!"

The moon rose higher and shed a shower of silver over the grass, lighting up in strong relief the fair face upturned to it.

"Now the 'Souls' pretend to have ideas," continued Maryllia, still apostrophising the bland stillness; "But their ideas are low,—decidedly low,—and decidedly queer. And that Cabinet Ministers are in their set doesn't make them any the better. I could have been a 'Soul' if I had liked. I could have learnt a lot of wicked secrets from the married peer who wanted to be my 'affinity,'—only I wouldn't. I could have got all the Government 'tips,' gambled with them on the Stock Exchange, and made quite a fortune as a 'Soul.' Yet here I am,—no 'Soul,'—but only a poor little body, with something in me that asks for a higher flight than mere social intrigue. Just a bit of a higher flight, eh, Plato? What do you think about it?"

Plato the leonine, waved his plumy tail responsively and gently rubbed his great head against her arm. Resting one hand lightly on his neck, she moved towards the house and slowly ascended the graduating slopes of the grass terrace. Here she was suddenly met by Primmins.

"Beg your pardon, Miss," he said, with an apologetic air, "but there's an old man from the village come up to see you —a very old man,—he's had to be carried in a chair, and it's took a couple of men nigh an hour and a half to bring him along. He says he knew you years ago,—I hardly like to send him away——"

"Certainly not!—of course you mustn't send him away," said Maryllia, quickening her steps; "Poor old dear! Where is he?"

"In the great hall, Miss. They brought him through the courtyard and got him in there, before I had time to send them round to the back entrance."

Maryllia entered the house. There she was met by Mrs. Spruce, with uplifted hands.

"Well, it do beat me altogether, Miss," she exclaimed, "as

to how these silly men, my 'usband, too, one of the silliest, beggin' your parding, could bring that poor old Josey Letherbarrow up here all this way! And he not toddled beyond the church this seven or eight years! And it's all about those blessed Five Sisters they've come, though I told 'em you can't nohow be worrited and can't see no one——"

"But I can!" said Maryllia decisively; "I can see anyone who wishes to see me, and I will. Let me pass, Mrs. Spruce, please!"

Mrs. Spruce, thus abruptly checked, stood meekly aside, controlling her desire to pour forth fresh remonstrances at the unseemliness of any person or persons intruding upon the Lady of the Manor at so late an hour in the evening as half-past nine o'clock. Maryllia hastened into the hall and there found an odd group awaiting her, composed of three very odd-looking personages,—much more novel and striking in their oddity than anything that could have been presented to her view in the social whirl of Paris or London. Josey Letherbarrow was the central figure, seated bolt upright in a cane arm-chair, through the lower part of which a strong pole had been thrust, securely nailed and clamped, as well as tied in a somewhat impromptu fashion with clothes-line. This pole projected about two feet on either side of the chair to accommodate the bearers, namely Spruce and Bainton, who, having set their burden down, were now wiping their hot faces and perspiring brows with flagrantly coloured handkerchiefs of an extra large size. As Maryllia appeared, they abruptly desisted from this occupation and remained motionless, stricken with sudden confusion and embarrassment. Not so old Josey, for with unexpected alacrity he got out of his chair and stood upright, supporting himself on his stick, and doffing his old straw hat to the light girlish figure that approached him with the grace of kindliness and sympathy expressed in its every movement.

"There she be!" he exclaimed; "There be the little gel wot I used to know when she was a babby, God bless 'er! Jes' the same eyes and 'air and purty face of 'er! Welcome

'ome to th' owld Squire's daughter, mates! D'ye 'ear me!" And he turned a dim rolling eye of command on Spruce and Bainton—"I sez welcome 'ome! And when I sez it I 'spect it to be said arter me by the both of ye,—welcome 'ome!"

Spruce, unable to hear a word of this exordium, smiled sheepishly,—and twirling the cap he held, put his coloured handkerchief into it and squeezed it tightly within the lining. Bainton, with the impending fate of the Five Sisters in view, judged it advisable not to irritate or disobey the old gentleman whom he had brought forward as special pleader in the case, and gathering his wits together he spoke out bravely.

"Welcome 'ome, it is, Josey!" he said; "We both sez it, and we both means it! And we 'opes the young lady will not take it amiss as 'ow we've come to see 'er on the first night of 'er return, and wish 'er 'appy in the old 'ouse and long may she remain in it!"

Here he broke off, his eloquence being greatly disturbed by the gracious smile Maryllia gave him.

"Thank you so much!" she murmured, sweetly; and then going up to Josey Letherbarrow, she patted the brown wrinkled hand that grasped the stick. "How kind and good of you to come and see me! And so you knew me when I was a little girl? I hope I was nice to you! Was I?"

Josey waved his straw hat speechlessly. His first burst of enthusiasm over, he was somewhat dazed, and a little uncertain as to how he should next proceed with his mission.

"Tell 'er as 'ow the Five Sisters be chalked;" growled Bainton in an undertone.

But Josey's mind had gone wandering far afield, groping amid memories of the past, and his aged eyes were fixed on Maryllia with a strange look of wonder and remembrance commingled.

"Th' owld Squire! Th' owld Squire!" he muttered; "I see 'im now—as broad an' tall and well-set up a gentleman as ever lived—and sez he: 'Josey, that little white thing is all I've got left of the wife I was bringin' 'ome to be the

sunshine of the old Manor.' Ay, he said that! 'Its eyes are like those of my Dearest!' Ay, he said that, too! The little white thing! She's 'ere,—and th' owld Squire's gone!"

The pathos of his voice struck Maryllia to the heart,—and for the moment she could not keep back a few tears that gathered, despite herself, and glistened on her long lashes. Furtively she dashed them away, but not before Bainton had seen them.

"Well, arter all, Josey's nothin' but a meanderin' old idgit!" he thought angrily; "'Ere 'ave I been an' took 'im for a wise man wot would know exackly 'ow to begin and ask for the sparin' of the old trees, and if he ain't gone on the wrong tack altogether and made the poor little lady cry! I think I'll do a bit of this business myself while I've got the chance—for if I don't, ten to one he'll be tellin' the story of the wopses' nest next, and a fine oncommon show we'll make of ourselves 'ere with our manners." And he coughed loudly—"Ahem! Josey, will you tell Miss Vancourt about the Five Sisters, or shall I?"

Maryllia glanced from one to the other in bewilderment.

"The Five Sisters!" she echoed; "Who are they?"

Here Spruce imagined, as he often did, that he had been asked a question.

"Such were our orders from Mr. Leach," he said, in his quiet equable voice; "We's to be there to-morrow marnin' quarter afore six with ropes and axes."

"Ropes and axes shall not avail against the finger of the Lord, or the wrath of the Almighty!" said Josey Letherbarrow, suddenly coming out of his abstraction; "And if th' owld Squire were alive he wouldn't have had 'em touched—no, not he! He'd ha' starved sooner! And if the Five Sisters are laid low, the luck of the Manor will lay low with 'em! But it's not too late—not too late!"—and he turned his face, now alive in its every feature with strong emotion, to Maryllia—"Not too late if the Squire's little gel is still her father's pride and glory! And that's what I've come for—to the Manor this night,—I ain't been inside the old 'ouse for

this ten 'ear or more, but they's brought me,—me—old Josey,—stiff as I am, and failin' as I am, to see ye, my dear little gel, and ask ye for God's love to save the old trees wot 'as waved in the woodland free and wild for 'undreds o' years, and wot deserves more gratitude from Abbot's Manor than killin' for long sarvice!"

He began to tremble with nervous excitement, and Maryllia put her hand soothingly on his arm.

"You must sit down, Josey," she said; "You will be so tired standing! Sit down and tell me all about it! What trees are you speaking of? And who is going to cut them down? You see I don't know anything about the place yet,—I've only just arrived—but if they are *my* trees, and you say my father would not have wished them to be cut down, they sha'n't be cut down!—be sure of that!"

Josey's eyes sparkled, and he waved his battered hat triumphantly.

"Didn't I tell ye?" he exclaimed, turning round upon Bainton; "Didn't I say as 'ow this was the way to do it?—and as 'ow the little gel wot I knew as a babby would listen to me when she wouldn't listen to no one else? An' as 'ow the Five Sisters would be spared? An' worn't I right? Worn't I true?"

Maryllia smiled.

"You really must sit down!" she said again, gently persuading him into his chair, wherein he sank heavily, like a stone, though his face shone with alertness and vigour. "Primmins!" and she addressed that functionary who had been standing in the background watching the little scene; "Bring some glasses of port wine." Primmins vanished to execute this order. "Now, you dear old man," continued Maryllia, drawing up an oaken settle close to Josey's knee and seating herself with a confidential air; "you must tell me just what you want me to do, and I will do it!"

She looked a mere child, with her fair face upturned and her rippling hair falling loosely away from her brows. A great tenderness softened Josey's eyes as he fixed them upon her.

"God Almighty bless ye!" he said, raising his trembling hand above her head; "God bless ye in your uprisin' and downlyin',—and make the old 'ouse and the old ways sweet to ye! For there's naught like 'ome in a wild wandering world—and naught like love to make 'appiness out of sorrow! God bless ye, dear litle gel!—and give ye all your 'art's desire, if so be it's for your good and guidin'!"

Instinctively, Maryllia bent her head with a pretty reverence under the benediction of so venerable a personage, and gently pressed the wrinkled hand as it slowly dropped again. Then glancing at Bainton, she said softly:

"He's very tired, I'm afraid!—perhaps too tired to tell me all he wishes to say. Will you explain what it is he wants?"

Bainton, thus adjured, took courage.

"Thank ye kindly, Miss; and if I may make so bold, it's not what he wants more'n wot all the village wants and wot we've been 'opin' against 'ope for, trustin' to the chance of your comin' 'ome to do it for us. Passon Walden he's a rare good man, and he's done all he can, and he's been and seen Oliver Leach, but it ain't all no use,——"

He paused, as Maryllia interrupted him by a gesture.

"Oliver Leach?" she queried; "He is my agent here, I believe?"

"Jes' so, Miss—he was put in as agent arter the Squire's death, and he's been 'ere ever since, bad luck to 'im! And he's been a-cuttin' down timber on the place whenever he's took a mind to, askin' no by-your-leaves, and none of us 'adn't no right to say a wurrd, he bein' master-like—but when it comes to the Five Sisters—why then we sez, if the Five Sisters lay low there's an end of the pride and prosperity of the village, an' Passon Walden he be main worrited about it, for he do love trees like as they were his own brothers, m'appen more'n brothers, for sometimes there's no love lost 'twixt the likes o' they, and beggin' your pardon, Miss, he sent me to ye with a message from hisself 'fore dinner, but you was a-lyin' down and couldn't be disturbed nohow, so I goes

down to Spruce"—here Bainton indicated the silent Spruce with a jerk of his thumb—"he be the forester 'ere, under Mr. Leach's orders, as deaf as a post unless you 'ollers at him, but a good-meanin' man for all that—and I sez, 'Spruce, you and me 'ull go an' fetch old Josey Letherbarrow, and see if bein' the oldest 'n'abitant, as they sez in books, he can't get a wurrd with Miss Vancourt, and so 'ere we be, Miss, for the trees be chalked"—and he turned abruptly to Spruce and bellowed—"Baint the trees chalked for comin' down to-morrow marnin'? Speak fair!"

Spruce heard, and at once gave a lucid statement.

"By Mr. Leach's orders, Miss," he said, addressing Maryllia; "The five old beech-trees on the knoll, which the village folk call the 'Five Sisters' are to be felled to-morrow marnin'. They've stood, so I'm told, an' so I b'lieve, two or three hundred years——"

"And they're going to be cut down!" exclaimed Maryllia. "I never heard of such wickedness! How disgraceful!"

Spruce saw by the movement of her lips that she was speaking, and therefore at once himself subsided into silence. Bainton again took up the parable.

"He's nigh stone-deaf, Miss, so you'll 'scuse him if he don't open his mouth no more till we shouts at him—but what he sez is true enough. At six o'clock to-morrow marnin'——"

Here Primmins entered with the port wine.

"Primmins, where does the agent, Leach, live?" enquired Maryllia.

"I really couldn't say, Miss. I'll ask——"

"'Tain't no use askin'," said Bainton; "He lives a mile out of the village; but he ain't at 'ome nohow this evenin' bein' gone to Riversford town for a bit o' gamblin' at cards. Lor, Miss, beggin' yer pardon, gamblin' with the cards do get rid o' timber—it do reely now!"

Maryllia took a glass of port wine from the tray which Primmins handed to her, and gave it herself to old Josey. Her mind had entirely grasped the situation, despite the prolix nature of Bainton's discourse. A group of historic old

trees were to be felled by the agent's orders at six o'clock the next morning unless she prevented it. That was the sum total of the argument. And here was something for her to do, and she resolved to do it.

"Now, Josey," she said with a smile, "you must drink a glass of wine to my health. And you also—and you!" and she nodded encouragingly to Spruce and Bainton; "And be quite satisfied about the trees—they shall not be touched."

"God bless ye!" said Josey, drinking off his wine at a gulp; "And long life t'ye and 'appiness to enjoy it!"

Bainton, with a connoisseur's due appreciation of a good old brand, sipped at his glass slowly, while Spruce, hastily swallowing his measure of the cordial, wiped his mouth furtively with the back of his hand, murmuring: "Your good 'elth, an' many of 'em!"

"Wishin' ye long days o' peace an' plenty," said Bainton, between his appreciative sips; "But as fur as the trees is consarned, you'll 'scuse me, Miss, for sayin' it, but the time bein' short, I don't see 'ow it's goin' to be 'elped, Oliver Leach bein' away, and no post delivered at his 'ouse till eight o'clock——"

"I will settle all that," said Maryllia—"You must leave everything to me. In the meantime,"—and she glanced at Spruce,—then appealingly turned to Bainton—"Will you try and make your friend understand an order I want to give him? Or shall I ask Mrs. Spruce to come and speak to him?"

"Lord love ye, he'll be sharper to hear me than his wife, Miss, beggin' yer pardon," said Bainton, with entire frankness. "He's too accustomed to her jawin' an' wouldn't get a clear impression like. Spruce!" And he uplifted his voice in a roar that made the old rafters of the hall ring. "Get ready to take Miss Vancourt's orders, will ye?"

Spruce was instantly on the alert, and put his hand to his ear.

"Tell him, please," said Maryllia, still addressing Bainton, "that he is to meet the agent as arranged at the appointed

place to-morrow morning; but that he is not to take any ropes or axes or any men with him. He is simply to say that by Miss Vancourt's orders the trees are not to be touched."

These words Bainton dutifully bellowed into Spruce's semi-closed organs of hearing. A look first of astonishment and then of fear came over the simple fellow's face.

"I'm afraid," he at last faltered, "that the lady does not know what a hard man Mr. Leach is; he'll as good as kill me if I go there alone to him!"

"Lord love ye, man, you won't be alone!" roared Bainton,—"There's plenty in the village 'ull take care o' that!"

"Say to him," continued Maryllia steadily, noting the forester's troubled countenance, "he must now remember that I am mistress here, and that my orders, even if given at the last moment, are to be obeyed."

"That's it!" chuckled Josey Letherbarrow, knocking his stick on the ground in a kind of ecstasy,—"That's it! Things ain't goin' to be as they 'as been now the Squire's little gel is 'ome! That's it!" And he nodded emphatically. "Give a reskil rope enough an' he'll 'ang hisself by the neck till he be dead, and the Lord ha' mercy on his soul!"

Maryllia smiled, watching all her three quaint visitors with a sensation of mingled interest and whimsical amusement.

"D'ye hear? You're to tell Leach," shouted Bainton, "that Miss Vancourt is mistress 'ere, and her orders is to be obeyed at the last moment! Which you might ha' understood without splittin' my throat to tell ye, if ye had a little more sense, which, lackin' 'owever, can't be 'elped. What are ye afeard of, eh?"

"Mr. Leach is a hard man," continued Spruce, anxiously glancing at Maryllia; "He would lose me my place if he could——"

Maryllia heard, and privately decided that the person to lose his place would be Leach himself. "It is quite exciting!" she thought; "I was wondering a while ago what I should do to amuse myself in the country, and here I am called upon

at once to remedy wrongs and settle village feuds! Nothing could be more novel and delightful!" Aloud, she said,—

"None of the people who were in my father's service will lose their places with me, unless for some very serious fault. Please"—and she raised her eyes in pretty appeal to Bainton, "Please make everybody understand that! Are you one of the foresters here?"

Bainton shook his head.

"No, Miss,—I'm the Passon's head man. I doos all his gardening and keeps a few flowers growin' in the churchyard. There's a rose climbin' over the cross on the old Squire's grave what will do ye good to see, come another fortnight of this warm weather. But Passon, he be main worrited about the Five Sisters, and knowin' as 'ow I'd worked for the old Squire at 'arvest an' sich-like, he thought I might be able to 'splain to ye——"

"I see!" said Maryllia, thoughtfully, surveying with renewed interest the old-world figure of Josey Letherbarrow in his clean smock-frock. "Now, how are you going to get Josey home again?" And a smile irradiated her face. "Will you carry him along just as you brought him?"

"Why, yes, Miss—it'll be all goin' downhill now, and there's a moon, and it'll be easy work. And if so be we're sure the Five Sisters 'ull be saved——"

"You may be perfectly certain of it," said Maryllia interrupting him with a little gesture of decision—"Only you must impress well on Mr. Spruce here, that my orders are to be obeyed."

"Beggin' yer pardon, Miss—what Spruce is afeard of is that Leach may tell him he's a liar, and may jest refuse to obey. That's quite on the cards, Miss—it is reely now!"

"Oh, is it, indeed!" and Maryllia's eyes flashed with a sudden fire that made them look brighter and deeper than ever and revealed a depth of hidden character not lacking in self-will,—"Well, we shall see! At any rate, I have given my orders, and I expect them to be carried out! You understand?"

"I do, Miss;" and Bainton touched his forelock respectfully; "An' while we're joggin' easy downhill with Josey, I'll get it well rubbed into Spruce. And, by yer leave, if you hain't no objection, I'll tell Passon Walden that sich is your orders, and m'appen he'll find a way of impressin' Leach straighter than we can."

Maryllia was not particularly disposed to have the parson brought into her affairs, but she waived the query lightly aside.

"You can do as you like about that," she said carelessly; "As the parson is your master, you can of course tell him if you think he will be interested. But I really don't see why he should be asked to interfere. My orders are sufficient."

A very decided ring of authority in the clear voice warned Bainton that here was a lady who was not to be trifled with, or to be told this or that, or to be put off from her intentions by any influence whatsoever. He could not very well offer a reply, so he merely touched his forelock again and was discreetly silent. Maryllia then turned playfully to Josey Letherbarrow.

"Now are you quite happy?" she asked. "Quite easy in your mind about the trees?"

"Thanks be to the Lord and you, God bless ye!" said Josey, piously; "I'm sartin sure the Five Sisters 'ull wave their leaves in the blessed wind long arter I'm laid under the turf and the daisies! I'll sleep easy this night for knowin' it, and thank ye kindly and all blessin' be with ye! And if I never sees ye no more——"

"Now, Josey, don't talk nonsense!" said Maryllia, with a pretty little air of protective remonstrance; "Such a clever old person as you are ought to know better than to be morbid! 'Never see me no more' indeed! Why I'm coming to see *you* soon,—very soon!—I shall find out where you live, and I shall pay you a visit and have *such* a long talk with you! I'm a dreadful talker! You shall tell me all about the village and the people in it, and I'm sure I shall learn more from you in

an hour than if I studied the place by myself for a week! Sha'n't I?"

Josey was decidedly flattered. The port wine had reddened his nose and had given an extra twinkle to his eyes.

"Well, I ain't goin' to deny but what I knows a thing or two—" he began, with a sly glance at her.

"Of course you do! Heaps of things! I shall coax them all out of you! And now, good-night!—No!—don't get up!" for Josey was making herculean efforts to rise from his chair again. "Just stay where you are, and let them carry you carefully home. Good-night!"

She gave a little salute which included all three of her rustic visitors, and moved away. Passing under the heavily-carved arched beams of oak which divided the hall from the rest of the house, she turned her head backward over her shoulder with a smile.

"Good-night, Ambassador Josey!"

Josey waved his old hat energetically.

"Good-night, my beauty! Good-night to Squire's gel! Good-night——"

But before he could pile on any more epithets, she was gone, and the butler Primmins stood in her place.

"I'll help give you a lift down to the gates," he said, surveying Josey with considerable interest; "You're a game old chap for your age!"

Josey was still waving his hat to the dark embrasure through which Maryllia's white figure had vanished.

"Ain't she a beauty? Ain't she jest a real Vancourt pride?" he demanded excitedly; "Lord! We won't know ourselves in a month or two! You marrk my wurrds, boys! See if what I say don't come true! Leach may cheat the gallus, but he won't cheat them blue eyes, let him try ever so! They'll be the Lord's arrows in his skin! You see if they ain't!"

Bainton here gave a signal to Spruce, and they hoisted up the improvised carrying-chair between them, Primmins steadying it behind.

"There ain't goin' to be no layin' low of the Five Sisters!" Josey continued with increasing shrillness and excitement as he was borne out into the moonlit courtyard; "And there ain't goin' to be no devil's work round the old Manor no more! Welcome 'ome to Squire's gel! Welcome 'ome!"

"Shut up, Josey!" said Bainton, though kindly enough—"You'll soon part with all the breath you've got in yer body if ye makes a screech owl of yerself like that in the night air! You's done enough for once in a way,—keep easy an' quiet while we carries ye back to the village—ye weighs a hundred pound 'eavier if ye're noisy,—ye do reely now!"

Thus adjured, Josey subsided into silence, and what with the joy he felt at the success of his embassy, the warm still air, and the soothing influence of the moonlight, he soon fell fast asleep, and did not wake till he arrived at his own home in safety. Having deposited him there, and seen to his comfort, Spruce and Bainton left him to his night's rest, and held a brief colloquy outside his cottage door.

"I'm awful 'feard goin' to-morrow marnin' up to the Five Sisters with ne'er a tool and ne'er a man,—Leach 'ull be that wild!" said Spruce, his rubicund face paling at the very thought—"If I could but 'ave 'ad written instructions, like!"

"Why didn't you ask for 'em while you 'ad the chance?" demanded Bainton testily; "It's too late now to bother your mind with what ye might ha' done if ye'd had a bit of gumption. And it's too late for me to be goin' and speakin' to Passon Walden. There's nothin' to be done now till the marnin'!"

"Nothin' to be done till the marnin'," echoed Spruce with a sigh, catching these words by happy chance; "All the same, she's a fine young lady, and 'er orders is to be obeyed. She ain't a bit like what I expected her to be."

"Nor she ain't what I bet she would be," said Bainton, heedless as to whether his companion heard him or not; "I've lost 'arf a crown to my old 'ooman, for I sez, sez I, 'She's bound to be a 'igh an' mighty stuck-up sort o' miss wot won't never 'ave a wurrd for the likes of we,' an' my old 'ooman

she sez to me: 'Go 'long with ye for a great silly gawk as ye are; I'll bet ye 'arf a crown she won't be!' So I sez 'Done,'—an' done it is. For she's just as sweet as clover in the spring, an' seems as gentle as a lamb,—though I reckon she's got a will of 'er own and a mind to do what she likes, when and 'ow she likes. I'll 'ave a fine bit o' talk with Passon 'bout her as soon as iver he gives me the chance."

"Ay, good-night it is," observed Spruce, placidly taking all these remarks as evening adieux,—"Yon moon's got 'igh, and it's time for bed if so be we rises early. Easy rest ye!"

Bainton nodded. It was all the response necessary. The two then separated, going their different ways to their different homes, Spruce having to get back to the Manor and a possible curtain-lecture from his wife. All the village was soon asleep,—and eleven o'clock rang from the church-tower over closed cottages in which not a flicker of lamp or candle was to be seen. The moonbeams shed a silver rain upon the outlines of the neatly thatched roofs and barns—illumining with touches of radiance as from heaven, the beautiful 'God's House' which dominated the whole cluster of humble habitations. Everything was very quiet,—the little hive of humanity had ceased buzzing; and the intense stillness was only broken by the occasional murmur of a ripple breaking from the river against the pebbly shore.

Up at the Manor, however, the lights were not yet extinguished. Maryllia, on the departure of 'Ambassador Josey' as she had called him, and his two convoys, had sent for Mrs. Spruce and had gone very closely with her into certain matters connected with Mr. Oliver Leach. It had been difficult work,—for Mrs. Spruce's garrulity, combined with her habit of wandering from the immediate point of discussion, and her anxiety to avoid involving herself or her husband in trouble, had created a chaotic confusion in her mind, which somewhat interfered with the lucidity of her statements. Little by little, however, Maryllia extracted a sufficient number of facts from her hesitating and reluctant evidence to gain considerable information on many points respecting the

management of her estate, and she began to feel that her return home was providential and had been in a manner pre-ordained. She learned all that Mrs. Spruce could tell her respecting the famous 'Five Sisters'; how they were the grandest and most venerable trees in all the country round—and how they stood all together on a grassy eminence about a mile and a half from the Manor-house and on the Manor lands just beyond the more low-lying woods that spread between. Whereupon Maryllia decided that she would take an early ride over her property the next day,—and gave orders that her favourite mare, 'Cleopatra,' ready saddled and bridled, should be brought round to the door at five o'clock the next morning. This being settled, and Mrs. Spruce having also humbly stated that all the peacocks' feathers she could find had been summarily cast forth from the Manor through the medium of the parcels' post, Maryllia bade her a kindly good-night.

"To-morrow," she said, "we will go all over the house together, and you will explain everything to me. But the first thing to be done is to save those old trees."

"Well, no one wouldn't 'ave saved 'em if so be as you 'adn't come 'ome, Miss," declared Mrs. Spruce. "For Mr. Leach he be a man of his word, and as obs'nate as they makes 'em, which the Lord Almighty knows men is all made as obs'nate as pigs—and he's been master over the place like——"

"More's the pity!" said Maryllia; "But he is master here no longer, Spruce; I am now both mistress and master. Remember that, please!"

Mrs. Spruce curtseyed dutifully and withdrew. The close cross-examination she had undergone respecting Leach had convinced her of two things,—firstly, that her new mistress, though such a childlike-looking creature, was no fool,—and secondly, that though she was perfectly gentle, kind, and even affectionate in her manner, she evidently had a will of her own, which it seemed likely she would enforce, if necessary, with considerable vigour and imperativeness. And so the worthy old housekeeper decided that on the whole it would be well to be careful,—to mind one's P's and Q's as it were,—to pause

before rushing pell-mell into a flood of unpremeditated speech, and to pay the strictest possible attention to her regular duties.

"Then m'appen we'll stay on in the old place," she considered; "But if we doos those things which we ought not to have done, as they sez in the Prayer-book, we'll get the sack in no time, for all that she looks so smilin' and girlie-like."

And so profound were her cogitations on this point that she actually forgot to give her husband the sound rating she had prepared for him concerning the part he had taken in bringing Josey Letherbarrow up to the Manor. Returning from the village in some trepidation, that harmless man was allowed to go to bed and sleep in peace, with no more than a reminder shrilled into his ears to be 'up with the dawn, as Miss Maryllia would be about early.'

Maryllia herself, meanwhile, quite unconscious that her small personality had made any marked or tremendous effect upon her domestics, retired to rest in happy mood. She was glad to be in her own home, and still more glad to find herself needed there.

"I've been an absolutely useless creature up till now," she said, shaking down her hair, after the maid Nancy had disrobed her and left her for the night. "The fact is, there never was a more utterly idle and nonsensical creature in the world than I am! I've done nothing but dress and curl my hair, and polish my face, and dance, and flirt and frivol the time away. Now, if I only am able to save five historical old trees, I shall have done something useful;—something more than half the women I know would ever take the trouble to do. For, of course, I suppose I shall have a row,—or as Aunt Emily would say 'words,'—with the agent. All the better! I love a fight,—especially with a man who thinks himself wiser than I am! That is where men are so ridiculous,—they always think themselves wiser than women, even though some of them can't earn their own living except through a woman's means. Lots of men will take a woman's money, and sneer at her while spending it! I know them!" And she nestled into

her bed, with a little cosy cuddling movement of her soft white shoulders—"'Take all and give nothing!' is the motto of modern manhood;—I don't admire it,—I don't endorse it; I never shall! The true motto of love and chivalry should be 'Give all—take nothing'!"

Midnight chimed from the courtyard turret. She listened to the mellow clang with a sense of pleased comfort and security.

"Many people would think of ghosts and all sorts of uncanny things in an old, old house like this at midnight;" she thought; "But somehow I don't believe there are any ghosts here. At any rate, not unpleasant ones;—only dear and loving 'home' ghosts, who will do me no harm!"

She soon sank into a restful slumber, and the moonlight poured in through the old latticed windows, forming a delicate tracery of silver across the faded rose silken coverlet of the bed, and showing the fair face, half in light, half in shade, that rested against the pillow, with the unbound hair scattered loosely on either side of it, like a white lily between two leaves of gold. And as the hours wore on, and the silence grew more intense, the slow and somewhat rusty pendulum of the clock in the tower could just be heard faintly ticking its way on towards the figures of the dawn. "Give all—take nothing—Give—all—take—no—thing!" it seemed to say;—the motto of love and the code of chivalry, according to Maryllia.

CHAPTER X

A THIN silver-grey mist floating delicately above the river Rest and dispersing itself in light wreaths across the flowering banks and fields, announced the breaking of the dawn,—and John Walden, who had passed a restless night, threw open his bedroom window widely, with a sense of relief that at last the time had come again for movement and action. His blood was warm and tingling with suppressed excitement,—he was ready for a fight, and felt disposed to enjoy it. His message to Miss Vancourt had apparently failed,—for on the previous evening Bainton had sent round word to say that he had been unable to see the lady before dinner, but that he was going to try again later on. No result of this second attempt had been forthcoming, so Walden concluded that his gardener had received a possibly curt and complete rebuff from the new 'Squire-ess,' and had been too much disheartened by his failure to come and report it.

"Never mind!—we'll have a tussle for the trees!" said John to himself, as after his cold tubbing he swung his dumbbells to and fro with the athletic lightness and grace of long practice; "If the villagers are prepared to contest Leach's right to destroy the Five Sisters, I'll back them up in it! I will! And I'll speak my mind to Miss Vancourt too! She is no doubt as apathetic and indifferent to sentiment as all her 'set,' but if I can prick her through her pachydermatous society skin, I'll do it!"

Having got himself into a great heat and glow with this

mental resolve and his physical exertions combined, he hastily donned his clothes, took his stoutest walking-stick, and sallied forth into the cool dim air of the as yet undeclared morning, the faithful Nebbie accompanying him. Scarcely, however, had he shut his garden gate behind him when Bainton confronted him.

"Marnin', Passon!"

"Oh, there you are!" said Walden—"Well, now what's going to be done?"

"Nothin's goin' to be done;" rejoined Bainton stolidly, with his usual inscrutable smile; "Unless m'appen Spruce is 'avin' every bone broke in his body 'fore we gets there. Ye see, he ain't got no written orders like,—and mebbe Leach 'ull tell him he's a liar and that Miss Vancourt's instructions is all my eye!"

"Miss Vancourt's instructions?" echoed Walden; "Has she given any?"

"Of coorse she has!" replied Bainton, triumphantly; "Which is that the trees is not to be touched on no account. And she's told Spruce, through me,—which I bellowed it all into his ear,—to go and meet Leach this marnin' up by the Five Sisters and give him 'er message straight from the shoulder!"

Walden's face cleared and brightened visibly.

"I'm glad—I'm very glad!" he said; "I hardly thought she could sanction such an outrage——but, tell me, how did you manage to give her my message?"

"'Tworn't your message at all, Passon, don't you think it!" said Bainton; "You ain't got so fur as that. She's not the sort o' lady to take a message from no one, whether passon, pope or emp'rur. Not she! It was old Josey Letherbarrow as done it." And he related the incidents of the past evening in a style peculiar to himself, laying considerable weight on his own remarkable intelligence and foresight in having secured the 'oldest 'n'abitant' of the village to act as representative and ambassador for the majority.

Walden listened with keen interest.

"Yes,—Leach is likely to be quarrelsome," he said, at its

conclusion; "There's no doubt about that. We mustn't leave Spruce to bear the brunt of his black rage all alone. Come along, Bainton!—I will enforce Miss Vancourt's orders myself if necessary."

This was just what Bainton wanted,—and master and man started off at a swinging pace for the scene of action, Bainton pouring forth as he went a glowing description of the wonderful and unexpected charm of the new mistress of the Manor.

"There ain't been nothin' like her in our neighbourhood iver at all, so fur as I can remember," he declared. "A' coorse I must ha' seed her when I worked for th' owld Squire at whiles, but she was a child then, an' I ain't a good hand at rememberin' like Josey be, besides I never takes much 'count of childern runnin' round. But 'ere was we all a-thinkin' she'd be a 'igh an' mighty fashion-plate, and she ain't nothin' of the sort, onny jest like a little sugar figure on a weddin'-cake wot looks sweet at ye and smiles pleasant,—though she's got a flash in them eyes of hers which minds me of a pony wot ain't altogether broke in. Josey, he sez them eyes is a-goin' to finish up Leach,—which mebbe they will and mebbe they won't;—all the same they's eyes you won't see twice in a lifetime! Lord love ye, Passon, ain't it strange 'ow the Almighty puts eyes in the 'eads of women wot ain't a bit like wot he puts in the 'eads of men! We gets the sight all right, but somehow we misses the beauty. An' there's plenty of women wot has eyes correct in stock and colour, as we sez of the flowers,—but they're like p'ison berries, shinin' an' black an' false-like,—an' if ye touch 'em ye're a dead man. Howsomever when ye sees eyes like them that was smilin' at old Josey last night, why it's jest a wonderful thing; and it don't make me s'prised no more at the Penny Poltry-books wot's got such a lot about blue eyes in 'em. Blue's the colour—there's no doubt about it;—there ain't no eye to beat a blue one!"

Walden heard all this disjointed talk with a certain impatience. Swinging along at a rapid stride, and glad in a sense that the old trees were to be saved, he was nevertheless

conscious of annoyance,—though by whom, or at what he was annoyed, he could not have told. Plunging into the dewy woods, with all the pungent odours of moss and violets about his feet, he walked swiftly on, Bainton having some difficulty to keep up with him. The wakening birds were beginning to pipe their earliest carols; gorgeously-winged insects, shaken by the passing of human footsteps from their slumbers in the cups of flowers, soared into the air like jewels suddenly loosened from the floating robes of Aurora,—and the gentle stir of rousing life sent a pulsing wave through the long grass. Every now and again Bainton glanced up at the 'Passon's' face and murmured under his breath,—'Blue's the colour—there ain't nowt to beat it!' possibly inspired thereto by the very decided blue sparkle in the eyes of the 'man of God' who was marching steadily along in the 'Onward Christian Soldiers' style, with his shoulders well back, his head well poised, and his whole bearing expressive of both decision and command.

Out of the woods they passed into an open clearing, where the meadows, tenderly green and wet with dew, sloped upwards into small hillocks, sinking again into deep dingles, adorned with may-trees that were showing their white buds like little pellets of snow among the green, and where numerous clusters of blackthorn spread out lovely lavish tangles of blossom as fine as shreds of bleached wool or thread-lace upon its jet-like stems. Across these fields dotted with opening buttercups and daisies, Walden and his 'head man about the place' made quick way, and climbing the highest portion of the rising ground just in front of them, arrived at a wide stretch of peaceful pastoral landscape comprising a fine view of the river in all its devious windings through fields and pastures, overhung at many corners with ancient willows, and clasping the village of St. Rest round about as with a girdle of silver and blue. Here on a slight eminence stood the venerable sentinels of the fair scene,—the glorious old 'Five Sister' beeches which on this very morning had been doomed to bid farewell for ever to the kind sky. Noble creatures were they in their splendid

girth and broadly-stretching branches, which were now all alive with the palest and prettiest young green,—and as Walden sprang up the thyme-scented turfy ascent which lifted them proudly above all their compeers, his heart beat with mingled indignation and gladness,—indignation that such grand creations of a bountiful Providence should ever have been so much as threatened with annihilation by a destructive, ill-conditioned human pigmy like Oliver Leach,—and gladness, that at the last moment their safety was assured through the intervention of old Josey Letherbarrow. For, of course Miss Vancourt herself would never have troubled about them. Walden made himself inwardly positive on that score. She could have no particular care or taste for trees, John thought. It was the pathetic pleading of Josey,—his quaint appearance, his extreme age—and his touching feebleness, which taken all together had softened the callous heart of the mistress of the Manor, and had persuaded her to stay the intended outrage.

"If Josey had asked her to spare a gooseberry-bush, she would probably have consented," said Walden to himself; "He is so old and frail,—she could hardly have refused his appeal without seeming to be almost inhuman."

Here his reflections were abruptly terminated by a clamour of angry voices, and hastening his steps up the knoll, he there confronted a group of rough rustic lads gathered in a defensive half-circle round Spruce who, white and breathless, was bleeding profusely from a deep cut across his forehead. Opposite him stood Oliver Leach, livid with rage, grasping a heavy dog-whip.

"You damned, deaf liar!" he shouted; "Do you think I'm going to take *your* word? How dare you disobey my orders! I'll have you kicked off the place, you and your loud-tongued wife and the whole kit of you! What d'ye mean by bringing these louts up from the village to bull-bait me, eh? What d'ye mean by it? I'll have you all locked up in Riversford jail before the day's much older! You whining cur!" And he raised his whip threateningly. "I've given you one, and I'll give you another——"

"Noa, ye woan't!" said a huge, raw-boned lad, standing out from the rest. "You woan't strike 'im no more, if ye wants a hull skin! Me an' my mates 'ull take care o' that! You go whoam, Mister Leach!—you go whoam!—you've 'eerd plain as the trees is to be left stannin'—them's the orders of the new Missis,—and you ain't no call to be swearin' yerself black in the face, 'cos you can't get yer own way for once. You're none so prutty lookin' that we woan't know 'ow to make ye a bit pruttier if ye stays 'ere enny longer!"

And he grinned suggestively, doubling a portentous fist, and beginning to roll up his shirt sleeves slowly with an ominous air of business.

Leach looked at the group of threatening faces, and pulled from his pocket a notebook and pencil.

"I know you all, and I shall take down your names," he said, with vindictive sharpness, though his lips trembled—"You, Spruce, are under my authority, and you have deliberately disobeyed my orders——"

"And you, Leach, are under Miss Vancourt's authority and you are deliberately refusing to obey your employer's orders!" said Walden, suddenly emerging from the shadow cast by one of the great trees, "And you have assaulted and wounded Spruce who brought you those orders. Shame on you, man! Riversford jail is more likely to receive *you* as a tenant than any of these lads!" Here he turned to the young men who on seeing their minister had somewhat sheepishly retreated, lifting their caps and trampling backward on each other's toes; "Go home, boys," he said peremptorily, yet kindly; "There's nothing for you to do here. Go home to your breakfasts and your work. The trees won't be touched——"

"Oh, won't they!" sneered Leach, now perfectly white with passion; "Who's going to pay me for the breaking of my contract, I should like to know? The trees are sold—they were sold as they stand a fortnight ago,—and down they come to-day, orders or no orders; I'll have my own men up here at work in less than an hour!"

Walden turned upon him.

"Very well then, I shall ask Miss Vancourt to set the police to watch her trees and take you into custody;" he said, coolly; "If you have sold the trees standing, to cover your gambling debts, you will have to *un*sell them, that's all! They never were yours to dispose of;—you can no more sell them than you can sell the Manor. You have no permission to make money for yourself out of other people's property. That kind of thing is common thieving, though it *may* sometimes pass for Estate Agency business!"

Leach sprang forward, his whip uplifted,—but before it could fall, with one unanimous yell, the young rustics rushed upon him and wrested it from his hand. At this moment Bainton, who had been silently binding Spruce's cut forehead with a red cotton handkerchief, so that the poor man presented the appearance of a melodramatic 'stage' warrior, suddenly looked up, uttered an exclamation, and gave a warning signal.

"Better not go on wi' the hargyment jes' now, Passon!" he said,—"'Ere comes the humpire!"

Even as he spoke, the quick gallop of hoofs echoed thuddingly on the velvety turf, and the group of disputants hastily scattered to right and left, as a magnificent mare, wild-eyed and glossy-coated, dashed into their centre and came to a swift halt, drawn up in an instant by the touch of her rider on the rein. All eyes were turned to the slight woman's figure in the saddle, that sat so easily, that swayed the reins so lightly, and that seemed as it were, throned high above them in queenly superiority—a figure wholly unconventional, clad in a riding-skirt and jacket of a deep soft violet hue, and wearing no hat to shield the bright hair from the fresh wind that waved its fair ripples to and fro caressingly and tossed a shining curl loose from the carelessly twisted braid. Murmurs of 'The new Missis!' 'Th' owld Squire's darter!'—ran from mouth to mouth, and John Walden, seized by a sudden embarrassment, withdrew as far as possible into the shadow of the trees in a kind of nervous hope to escape from the young lady's decidedly haughty glance, which swept like a flash of light,

round the assembled group and settled at last with chill scrutiny on the livid and breathless Oliver Leach.

"You are the agent here, I presume?"

Maryllia's voice rang cold and clear,—there was not a trace of the sweet and coaxing tone in it that had warmed the heart of old Josey Letherbarrow.

Leach looked up, lifting his cap half reluctantly.

"I am!"

"You have had my orders?"

Leach was silent. The young rustics hustled one another forward, moved by strong excitement, all eager to see the feminine 'Humpire' who had descended upon them as suddenly as a vision falling from the skies, and all wondering what would happen next.

"You have had my orders?" repeated Maryllia;—then, as no answer was vouchsafed to her, she looked round and perceived Bainton. To him she at once addressed herself.

"Who has struck Spruce?"

Bainton hesitated. It was an exceedingly awkward position. He looked appealingly, as was his wont, up into the air and among the highest branches of the 'Five Sisters' for 'Passon Walden,' but naturally could not discover him at that elevation.

"Come, come!" said Maryllia, imperatively—"You are not all deaf, I hope! Give me a straight answer, one of you! Who struck Spruce?"

"Mister Leach did!" said the big-boned lad who had constituted himself Spruce's defender. "We 'eerd down in the village as 'ow you'd come 'ome, Miss, and as 'ow you'd give your orders that the Five Sisters was to be left stannin', and we coomed up wi' Spruce to see 'ow Leach 'ud take it, an' 'fore we could say a wurrd Leach he up wi' his whip and cut Spruce across the for'ead as ye see——"

Maryllia raised her hand and silenced him with a gesture.

"Thank you! That will do. I understand!" She turned towards Leach;—"What have you to say for yourself?"

"I take no orders from a servant," replied Leach, insolently.

"I have managed this estate for ten years, and I give in my statements and receive my instructions from the firm of solicitors who have it in charge. I am not called upon to accept any different arrangement without proper notice."

Maryllia heard him out with coldly attentive patience.

"You will accept a different arrangement without any further notice at all," she said; "You will leave the premises and resign all management of my property from this day henceforward. I dismiss you, for disobedience and insolence, and for assaulting my servant, Spruce, in the execution of his duty. And as for these trees, if any man touches a bough of one of them without my permission, I will have him prosecuted! Now you know my mind!"

She sat proudly erect in her saddle, while the village hobbledehoys who had instinctively gathered round her, like steel shavings round a magnet, fairly gasped for breath. Oliver Leach dismissed! Oliver Leach, the petty tyrant, the carping, snarling jack-in-office, cast out like a handful of bad rubbish! It was like a thunderbolt fallen from heaven and riving the earth on which they stood! Bainton heard, and could scarcely keep back a chuckle of satisfaction. He longed to make Spruce understand what was going on, but that unfortunate individual was slightly stunned by Leach's heavy blow, and sitting on the grass with his head between his two hands, was gazing, in a kind of stupefaction at the 'new Missis'; so that any 'bellowing' into his ear was scarcely possible.

Leach himself stared blankly and incredulously,—his face crimsoned with a sudden rush of enraged blood and then paled again, and changing his former insolent tone for one both fawning and propitiatory, he stammered out:

"I am very sorry—I—I beg your pardon, Madam!—if you will give yourself a little time to consider, you will see I have done my duty on this property all the time I have been connected with it. I hope you will not dismiss me for the first fault!——I—I—admit I should not have struck Spruce,—but—I—I was taken by surprise—I—I know my business,—and I am not accustomed to be interfered

with—" Here his pent-up anger got the better of him and he again began to bluster. "I have done my duty—no man better!" he said in fierce accents. "There's not an acre of woodland here that isn't in a better condition than it was ten years ago—Ah!—and bringing in more money too!—and now I am to be turned off for a parcel of village idiots who hardly know a beech from an elm! I'll make a case of it! Sir Morton Pippitt knows me—I'll speak to Sir Morton Pippitt——"

"Sir Morton Pippitt!" echoed Maryllia disdainfully; "What has he to do with me or my property?" Here she suddenly spied Walden, who, in his eagerness to hear every word that passed had, unconsciously to himself, moved well out of the sheltering shadow of the trees—"Are *you* Sir Morton Pippitt?"

A broad grin, deepening into a scarcely suppressed titter, went the round of the gaping young rustics. Walden himself smiled,—and recognising that the time had now come to declare himself, he advanced a step or two and lifted his hat.

"I have not that pleasure! I am the minister of this parish, and my name is John Walden. I'm afraid I am rather a trespasser here!—but I have loved these old trees for many years, and I came up this morning,—having heard what your orders were from my gardener Bainton,—to see that those orders were properly carried out,—and also to save possible disturbance——"

He broke off. Maryllia, while he spoke, had eyed him somewhat critically, and now favoured him with a charming smile.

"Thank you very much!" she said sweetly; "It was most kind of you! I wonder—" And she paused, knitting her pretty brows in perplexity; "I wonder if you could get rid of everybody for me?"

He glanced up at her in a little wonderment.

"Could you?" she repeated.

He drew nearer.

"Get rid of everybody?—you mean?——"

She leaned confidentially from her saddle.

"Yes—*you* know! Send them all about their business! Clergymen can always do that, can't they? There's really nothing more to be said or done—the trees shall not be touched,—the matter is finished. Tell all these big boys to go away—and—oh,—*you* know!"

A twinkle of merriment danced in Walden's eyes. But he turned quite a set and serious face round on the magnetised lads of the village, who hung about, loth to lose a single glance or a single word of the wonderful 'Missis' who had the audacious courage to dismiss Leach.

"Now, boys!" he said peremptorily; "Clear away home and begin your day's work! You're not wanted here any longer. The trees are safe,—and you can tell everyone what Miss Vancourt says about them. Bainton! You take these fellows home,—Spruce had better go with you. Just call at the doctor's on the way and get his wound attended to. Come now, boys!—sharp's the word!"

A general scrambling movement followed this brief exordium. With shy awkwardness each young fellow lifted his cap as he shambled sheepishly past Maryllia, who acknowledged these salutes smilingly,—Bainton assisted Spruce to rise to his feet, and then took him off under his personal escort,—and only Leach remained, convulsively gripping his dog-whip which he had picked up from the ground where the lads had thrown it,—and anon striking it against his boot with a movement of impatience and irritation.

"Good-morning, Mr. Leach!" said Walden pointedly But Leach stood still, looking askance at Maryllia.

"Miss Vancourt," he said, hoarsely; "Am I to understand that you meant what you said just now?"

She glanced at him coldly.

"That I dismiss you from my service? Of course I meant it! Of course I mean it!"

"I am bound to have fair notice," he muttered. "I cannot collect all my accounts in a moment——"

"Whatever else you may do, you will leave this place at once;" said Maryllia, firmly,—"I will communicate my

decision to the solicitors and they will settle with you. No more words, please!"

She turned her mare slowly round on the grassy knoll, looking up meanwhile at the lovely canopy of tremulous young green above her head. John Walden watched her. So did Oliver Leach,—and with a sudden oath, rapped out like a discordant bomb bursting in the still air, he exclaimed savagely:

"You shall repent this, my fine lady By God, you shall! You shall rue the day you ever saw Abbot's Manor again! You had far better have stayed with your rich Yankee relations than have made such a home-coming as this for yourself, and such an outgoing for me! My curse on you!"

Shaking his fist threateningly at her, he sprang down the knoll, and plunging through the grass and fern was soon lost to sight.

The soft colour in Maryllia's cheeks paled a little and a slight tremor ran through her frame. She looked at Walden, —then laughed carelessly.

"Guess I've given him fits!" she said, relapsing into one of her Aunt Emily's American colloquialisms, with happy unconsciousness that this particular phrase coming from her pretty lips sent a kind of shock through John's sensitive nerves. "He's not a very pleasant man to meet anyway! And it isn't altogether agreeable to be cursed on the first morning of my return home. But, after all, it doesn't matter much as there's a clergyman present!" And her blue eyes danced mischievously; "Isn't it lucky you came? You can stop that curse on its way and send it back like a homing pigeon, can't you? What do you say when you do it? '*Retro me Sathanas*,' or something of that kind, isn't it? Whatever it is, say it now, won't you?"

Walden laughed,—he could not help laughing. She spoke with such a whimsical flippancy, and she looked so bewitchingly pretty.

"Really, Miss Vancourt, I don't think I need utter any special formula on this occasion," he said, gaily. You

have done a good action to the whole community by dismissing Leach. Good actions bring their own reward, while curses, like chickens, come home to roost. Pray forgive me for quoting copybook maxims! But, for the curse of one ill-conditioned boor, you will have the thanks and blessings of all your tenantry. That will take the edge off the malediction; don't you think so?"

She turned her mare in the homeward direction, and began to guide it gently down the slope. Walking by her side, John held back one of the vast leafy boughs of the great trees to allow her to pass more easily, and glanced up at her smilingly as he put his question.

She met his eyes with an open frankness that somewhat disconcerted him.

"Well, I don't know about that!" she replied. "You see, in these days of telepathy and hypnotic suggestion, there may be something very catching about a curse. It's just like a little seed of disease;—if it falls on the right soil it germinates and spreads, and then all manner of wicked souls get the infection. I believe that in the old days everybody guessed this instinctively, without being able to express it scientifically,—and that's why they ran to the Church for protection against curses, and the evil eye, and things of that sort. See how some of the old Scottish curses cling even to this day! The only way to take the sting out of a curse is to get it transposed"—and she smiled, glancing meditatively up into the brightening blue of the sky. "Like a song, you know! If it's too low for the voice you transpose it to a higher key. I daresay the Church was able to do that in the days when it had *real* faith——oh!—I beg your pardon! —I ought not to say that to a man of your calling."

"Why not?" said Walden; "Pray say anything you like to me, Miss Vancourt;—I should be a very poor and unsatisfactory sort of creature if I could not bear any criticism on my vocation. Besides, I quite agree with you. The early Church had certainly more faith than it has now."

"You're not a bit like a parson," said Maryllia gravely,

studying his face with embarrassing candour and closeness; "You look quite a nice pleasant sort of man."

John Walden laughed again,—this time with sincere heartiness. Maryllia's eyes twinkled, and little dimples came and went round her mouth and chin.

"You seem amused at that," she said; "But I've seen a great deal of life—and I have met heaps and heaps of parsons —parsons young and parsons old—and they were all horrid, simply horrid! Some talked Bible—and others talked the Sporting Times—any amount of them talked the drama, and played villains in private theatricals. I never met but one real *minister*,—that is a man who ministers to the poor,—and he died in a London slum before he was thirty. I believe he was a saint; and if he had lived in the days of the early Church he would certainly have been canonised. He would have been Saint William—his name was William. But he was only one William,—I've seen hundreds of them."

"Hundreds of Williams?" queried Walden suggestively.

This time it was Maryllia who laughed,—a gay little laugh like that of a child.

"No, I guess not!" she answered; "Some of them are real Johnnies! Oh dear me!"—and again her laughter broke forth; "I quite forgot! You said *your* name was John!"

"So it is." And he smiled; "I'm sorry you don't like it!"

She checked her merriment abruptly, and became suddenly serious.

"But I do like it! You mustn't think I don't. Oh, how rude I must seem to you! Please forgive me! I really do like the name of John!"

He glanced up at her, still smiling.

"Thank you! It's very kind of you to say so!"

"You believe me, don't you?" she said, persistently.

"Of course I do! Of course I must! Though unhappily a Churchman, I am not altogether a heretic!"

The smile deepened in his eyes,—and as she met his somewhat quizzical glance a slight wave of colour rose to her

cheeks and brow. She drew herself up in her saddle with a sudden proud movement and carried her little head a trifle higher. Walden looked at her now as he would have looked at a charming picture, without the least embarrassment. She appeared so extremely young to him. She awakened in his mind a feeling of kindly paternal interest, such as he might have felt for Susie Prescott or Ipsie Frost. He was not even quite sure that he considered her in any way out of the common so far as her beauty was concerned,—though he recognised that she was almost the living image of 'the lady in the vi'let velvet' whose portrait adorned the gallery in Abbot's Manor. The resemblance was heightened by the violet colour of the riding-dress she wore and the absence of any head-covering save her own pretty brown-gold hair.

"I'm glad I've saved the old trees," she said presently, checking her mare's pace, and looking back at the Five Sisters standing in unmolested grandeur on their grassy throne. "I feel a pleasant consciousness of having done something useful. They are beautiful! I haven't looked at them half enough. I shall come here all by myself this afternoon and bring a book and read under their lovely boughs. Just now I've only had time to cry 'rescue.'" She hesitated a moment, then added: "I'm very much obliged to you for your assistance, Mr. Walden!—and I'm glad you also like the trees. They shall never be touched in my lifetime, I assure you!—and. I believe—yes, I believe I'll put something in my last will and testament about them—something binding, you know! Something that will set up a block in the way of land agents. Such trees as these ought to stand as long as Nature will allow them."

Walden was silent. Somehow her tone had changed from kind playfulness to ordinary formality, and her eyes rested upon him with a cool, slightly depreciatory expression. The mare was restless, and pawed the green turf impatiently.

"She longs for a gallop;" said Maryllia, patting the fine creature's glossy neck; "Don't you, Cleo? Her name is Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt. Isn't she a beauty?"

"She is indeed!" murmured Walden, with conventional politeness, though he scarcely glanced at the eulogised animal.

"She isn't a bit safe, you know," continued Maryllia; "Nobody can hold her but me! She's a perfectly magnificent hunter. I have another one who is gentleness itself, called Daffodil. My groom rides her. He could never ride Cleo." She paused, patting the mare's neck again,—then gathering up the reins in her small, loosely-gloved hand, she said: "Well, good-morning, Mr. Walden! It was most kind of you to get up so early and come to help defend my trees! I am ever so grateful to you! Pray call and see me at the Manor when you have nothing better to do. You will be very welcome!"

She nodded gracefully to him, and a few loose curls of lovely hair fell with the action like a web of sunbeams over her brow. Smiling, she tossed them back.

"Good-bye!" she called.

He raised his hat,—and in another moment the gallop of Cleopatra's swift hoofs thudded across the grass and echoed over the fields, gradually diminishing and dying away, as mare and rider disappeared within the enfolding green of the Manor woods. He stood for a while looking after the vanishing flash of violet, brown and gold, scudding over the turf and disappearing under the closely twisted boughs of budding oak and elm,—and then started to walk home himself. His face was a study of curiously mingled expressions. Surprise, amusement, and a touch of admiration struggled for the mastery in his mind, and he was compelled to admit to himself, albeit reluctantly, that the doubtfully-anticipated 'Squire-ess' was by no means the sort of person he had expected to see. Herein he was at one with Bainton.

"'Like a little sugar figure on a wedding-cake, looking sweet, and smiling pleasant!'" thought Walden, humorously recalling his gardener's description; "Scarcely that! She has a will of her own, and—possibly—a temper! A kind of spoilt child-woman, I should imagine; just the person to

wear all the fripperies Mrs. Spruce was so anxious about the other day, and quite frivolous enough to squeeze her feet into shoes a couple of sizes too small for her. Beautiful? No,—her features are not regular enough for actual beauty. Pretty? Well,—perhaps she is!—in a certain sense,—but I'm no judge. Fascinating? Possibly she might be—to some men. She certainly has a sweet voice, and a very charming manner. And I don't think she is likely to be disagreeable or discourteous. But there is nothing remarkable about her——she's just a woman—with a bright smile,—and a touch of American vivacity running through her English insularity. Just a woman—with a *way*!"

And he strode on, his terrier trotting soberly at his heels. But he was on the whole glad he had met the Lady of the Manor, because now he no longer felt any uneasiness concerning her. His curiosity was satisfied,—his instinctive dislike of her had changed to a kindly toleration, and his somewhat morbid interest in her arrival had quite abated. The 'Five Sisters' were saved—that was a good thing; and as for Miss Vancourt herself,—well!—she was evidently a harmless creature who would most likely play tennis and croquet all day and take very little interest in anything except herself.

"She will not interfere with me, nor I with her," said Walden with a sigh of satisfaction and relief; "And though we live in the same village, we shall be as far apart as the poles,—which is a great comfort!"

CHAPTER XI

MEANWHILE, Maryllia cantered home through the woods in complacent and lively humour. The first few hours of her return to the home of her forefathers had certainly not been lacking in interest and excitement. She had heard and granted a village appeal,—she had stopped an act of vandalism,—she had saved five of the noblest trees in England,—she had conquered the hearts of several village yokels,—she had thrust a tyrant out of office,—she had been cursed by the said tyrant, a circumstance which was, to say the very least of it, quite new to her experience and almost dramatic,—and,—she had 'made eyes' at a parson! Surely this was enough adventure for one morning, especially as it was not yet eight o'clock. The whole day had yet to come; possibly she might be involved later on in still more thrilling and sensational episodes,—who could tell! She carolled a song for pure gaiety of heart, and told the rustling leaves and opening flowers in very charmingly pronounced French that

"Votre cœur a beau se défendre
De s'enflammer,—
Le moment vient, il faut se rendre,
Il faut aimer!"

Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, curveted and pranced daintily at every check imposed on her rein, as became an equine royalty,—she was conscious of the elastic turf under her hoofs, and glad of the fresh pure air in her nostrils,—and her mistress shared with her the sense of freedom and buoyancy which an

open country and fair landscape must naturally inspire in those to whom life is a daily and abounding vigorous delight, not a mere sickly brooding over the past, or a morbid anticipation of the future. The woods surrounding Abbot's Manor were by no means depressing,—they were not dark silent vistas of solemn pine, leading into deeper and deeper gloom, but cheery and picturesque clumps of elm and beech and oak, broken at constant intervals with hazel-coppse, hawthorn and eglantine,—true English woods, suggestive of delicate romance and poesy, and made magical by the songs of birds, whose silver-throated melodies are never heard to sweeter advantage than under the leafy boughs of such unspoiled green lanes and dells as yet remain to make the charm and glamour of rural England. Primroses peeped out in smiling clusters from every mossy nook, and the pale purple of a myriad violets spread a wave of soft colour among the last year's fallen leaves, which had served good purpose in keeping the tender buds warm till Spring should lift them from their earth-cradles into full-grown blossom. Maryllia's bright eyes, glancing here and there, saw and noted a thousand beauties at every turn,—the chains of social convention and ordinance had fallen from her soul, and a joyous pulse of freedom quickened her blood and sent it dancing through her veins in currents of new exhilaration and vitality. With her multi-millionaire aunt, she had lived a life of artificial constraint, against which, despite its worldly brilliancy, her inmost and best instincts had always more or less rebelled;—now,—finding herself alone, as it were, with Mother Nature, she sprang like a child to that great maternal bosom, and nestled there with a sense of glad refreshment and peace.

"What dear wildflowers!" she murmured now, as restraining Cleopatra's coquettish gambols, she rode more slowly along, and spied the bluebells standing up among tangles of green, making exquisite contrast with the golden glow of aconites and the fragile white of wood-anemones,—"They are ever so much prettier than the hot-house things one gets any day in Paris and London! Big forced roses,—great lolling,

sickly-scented lilies, and orchids—oh dear! how tired I am of orchids! Every evening a bouquet of orchids for five weeks—Sundays *not* excepted,—shall I ever forget the detestable 'rare specimens'!"

A little frown puckered her brow, and for a moment the lines of her pretty mouth drooped and pouted with a quaintly petulant expression, like that of a child going to cry.

"It was complete persecution!" she went on, crooning her complaints to herself and patting Cleopatra's arched neck by way of accompaniment to her thoughts—"Absolute dodging and spying round corners after the style of a police detective. I just hate a lover who makes his love, if it *is* love, into a kind of whip to flog your poor soul with! Roxmouth here, Roxmouth there, Roxmouth everywhere!—he was just like the water in the Ancient Mariner 'and not a drop to drink.' At the play, at the Opera, in the picture-galleries, at the races, at the flower-shows, at all the 'crushes' and big functions,—in London, in Paris, in New York, in St. Petersburg, in Vienna,—always 'ce cher Roxmouth'—as Aunt Emily said;—money no consideration, distance no object,—always 'ce cher Roxmouth,' stiff as a poker, clean as fresh paint, and apparently as virtuous as an old maid,—with all his aristocratic family looming behind him, and a long ancestry of ghosts in the shadow of time, extending away back to some Saxon 'nobles,' who no doubt were coarse barbarians that ate more raw meat than was good for them, and had to be carried to bed dead drunk on mead! It *is* so absurd to boast of one's ancestry! If we could only just see the dreadful men who began all the great families, we should be perfectly ashamed of them! Most of them tore up their food with their fingers. Now we Vancourts are supposed to be descended from a warrior bold, named Robert Priaulx de Vaignecourt, who fought in the Crusades. Poor Uncle Fred used to be so proud of that! He was always talking about it, especially when we were in America. He liked to try and make the Pilgrim-Father-families jealous. Just as he used to boast that if he had only been born three minutes before my father,

instead of three minutes after, he would have been the owner of Abbot's Manor. That three minutes' delay and consideration he took about coming into the world made him the youngest twin, and cut off his chances. And he told me that Robert the Crusader had a brother named Osmonde, who was believed to have founded a monastery somewhere in this neighbourhood, and who died, so the story goes, during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, though there's no authentic trace left of either Osmonde or Robert anywhere. They might, of course, have been very decent and agreeable men,—but it's rather doubtful. If Osmonde went on a pilgrimage he would never have washed himself, to begin with,—it would have destroyed his sanctity. And as for Robert the warrior bold, he would have been dreadfully fierce and hairy,—and I'm quite sure I could not possibly have asked him to dinner!"

She laughed at her own fancies, and guided her mare under a drooping canopy of early-flowering wild acacia, just for the sheer pleasure of springing lightly up in her saddle to pull off a tuft of scented white blossom.

"The fact is," she continued half aloud, "there's nobody I can ask to dinner even now as it is. Not down here. The local descriptions of Sir Morton Pippitt do not tempt me to make his acquaintance, and as for the parson I met just now,—why he would be impossible!—simply impossible!" she repeated with emphasis—"I can see exactly what he's like at a glance. One of those cold, quiet, clever men who 'quiz' women and never admire them,—I know the kind of horrid University creature! A sort of superior, touch-me-not person who can barely tolerate a woman's presence in the room, and in his heart of hearts relegates the female sex generally to the lowest class of the animal creation. I can read it all in his face. He's rather good-looking—not very,—his hair curls quite nicely, but it's getting grey, and so is his moustache,—he must be at least fifty, I should think. He has a good figure—for a clergyman;—and his eyes——no, I'm not sure that I like his eyes—I believe they're deceitful. I must look at them again before I make up my mind. But I know he's

just as conceited and disagreeable as most parsons—he probably thinks that he helps to turn this world and the next round on his little finger,—and I daresay he tells the poor village folk here that if they don't obey him, they'll go to hell, and if they do, they'll fly straight to heaven and put on golden crowns at once. Dear me! What a ridiculous state of things! Fancy the dear old man in the smock who came to see me last night, with a pair of wings and a crown!"

Laughing again, she flicked Cleopatra's neck with the reins, and started off at an easy swinging gallop, turning out of the woods into the carriage drive, and never checking her pace till she reached the house.

All that day she gave marked evidence that her reign as mistress of Abbot's Manor had begun in earnest. Changing her riding dress for a sober little tailor-made frock of homespun, she flitted busily over the old house of her ancestors, visiting it in every part, peering into shadowy corners, opening antique presses and cupboards, finding out the secret of sliding panels in the Jacobean oak that covered the walls, and leaving no room unsearched. The apartment in which her father's body had lain in its coffin was solemnly unlocked and disclosed to her view under the title of 'the Ghost Room,'—whereat she was sorrowfully indignant,—so much so indeed that Mrs. Spruce shivered in her shoes, pricked by the sting of a guilty conscience, for, if the truth be told, it was to Mrs. Spruce's own too-talkative tongue that this offending name owed its origin. Quietly entering the peaceful chamber with its harmless and almost holy air of beautiful, darkened calm, Maryllia drew up the blinds, threw back the curtains, and opened the latticed windows wide, admitting a flood of sunshine and sweet air.

"It must never be called 'the Ghost Room' again,"—she said, with a reproachful gravity, which greatly disconcerted and overawed Mrs. Spruce—"otherwise it will have an evil reputation which it does not deserve. There is nothing ghostly or terrifying about it. It is a sacred room,—sacred to the memory of one of the dearest and best of men! It is

wrong to let such a room be considered as haunted,—I shall sleep in it myself sometimes,—and I shall make it bright and pretty for visitors when they come. I would put a little child to sleep in it,—for my father was a good man, and nothing evil can ever be associated with him. Death is only dreadful to the ignorant and the wicked."

Mrs. Spruce wisely held her peace, and dutifully followed her new mistress to the morning-room, where she had to undergo what might be called quite a stiff examination regarding all the household and housekeeping matters. Armed with a fascinating little velvet-bound notebook and pencil, Maryllia put down all the names of the different servants, both indoor and outdoor, (making a small private mark of her own against those who had served her father in any capacity, and those who were just new to the place) together with the amount of wages due every month to each,—she counted over all the fine house linen, much of which had been purchased for her mother's home-coming and had never been used;—she examined with all a connoisseur's admiration the almost priceless old china with which the Manor shelves, dressers and cupboards were crowded,—and finally after luncheon and an hour's deep cogitation by herself in the library, she wrote out in a round clerkly hand certain 'rules and regulations,' for the daily routine of her household, and handed the document to Mrs. Spruce,—much to that estimable dame's perturbation and astonishment.

"These are my hours, Spruce," she said—"And it will of course be your business to see that the work is done punctually and with proper method. There must be no waste or extravagance,—and you will bring me all the accounts every week, as I won't have bills running up longer than that period. I shall leave all the ordering in of provisions to you,—if it ever happens that you send something to table which I don't like, I will tell you, and the mistake need not occur again. Now is there anything else?"—and she paused meditatively, finger on lip, knitting her brows—"You see I've never done any housekeeping, but I've always had notions as to how I should do it

if I ever got the chance to try, and I'm just beginning. I believe in method,—and I like everything that *has* a place to be *in* its place, and everything that *has* a time, to come up to its time. It saves ever so much worry and trouble! Now let me think!—oh yes!—I knew there was another matter. Please let the gardeners and outdoor men generally know that if they want to speak to me, they can always see me from ten to half-past every morning. And, by the way, Spruce, tell the maids to go about their work quietly,—there is nothing more objectionable than a noise and fuss in the house just because a room is being swept and turned out. I simply hate it! In the event of any quarrels or complaints, please refer them to me——and——and——" Here she paused again with a smile—"Yes! I think that's all—for the present! I haven't yet gone through the library or the picture-gallery;—however those rooms have nothing to do with the ordinary daily housekeeping,—if I find anything wanting to be done there, I'll send for you again. But that's about all now!"

Poor Mrs. Spruce curtseyed deferentially and tremulously. She was not going to have it all her own way as she had fondly imagined when she first saw the apparently child-like personality of her new lady. The child-like personality was merely the rose-flesh covering of a somewhat determined character.

"And anything I can do for you, Spruce, or for your husband," continued Maryllia, dropping her business-like tone for one of as coaxing a sweetness as Shakespeare's Juliet practised for the persuasion of her too tardy Nurse—"will be done with ever so much pleasure! You know that, don't you?" And she laid her pretty little hands on the worthy woman's portly shoulders—"You shall go out whenever you like—after work, of course!—duty first, pleasure second!—and you shall even grumble, if you feel like it,—and have your little naps when the midday meal is done with,—Aunt Emily's housekeeper in London used to have them, and she snored dreadfully; the second footman—*quite* a nice lad—used to tickle her nose with a straw! But I can't afford to keep a second footman—one is quite enough,—or a coachman, or a

carriage;—besides, I would always rather ride than drive,—and my groom, Bennett, will only want a stable-boy to help him with Cleo and Daffodil. So I hope there'll be no one downstairs to tease you, Spruce dear, by tickling *your* nose with a straw! Primmins looks much too staid and respectable to think of such a thing."

She laughed merrily,—and Mrs. Spruce for the life of her could not help laughing too. The picture of Primmins condescending to indulge in a game of 'nose and straw' was too grotesque to be considered with gravity.

"Well I never, Miss!" she ejaculated—"You do put things that funny!"

"Do I? I'm so glad!" said Maryllia demurely—"it's nice to be funny to other people, even if you're not funny to yourself! But I want you to understand from the first, Spruce, that everyone must feel happy and contented in my household. So if anything goes wrong, you must tell me, and I will try and set it right. Now I'm going for an hour's walk with Plato, and when I come in, and have had my tea, I'll visit the picture-gallery. I know all about it,—Uncle Fred told me,"—she paused, and her eyes darkened with a wistful and deepening gravity,—then she added gently—"I shall not want you there, Spruce,—I must be quite alone."

Mrs. Spruce again curtseyed humbly, and was about to withdraw, when Maryllia called her back.

"What about the clergyman here, Mr. Walden?"—she asked—"Is he a nice man?—kind to the village people, I mean, and good to the poor?"

Mrs. Spruce gave a kind of ecstatic gasp, folded her fat hands tightly together in front of her voluminous apron, and launched forth straightway on her favourite theme.

"Mr. Walden is jest one of the finest men God ever made, Miss," she said, with solemnity and unction—"You may take my word for it! He's that good, that as we often sez, if m'appen there ain't no saint in the Sarky an' nowt but dust, we've got a real live saint walkin' free among us as is far more 'spectable to look at in his plain coat an' trousers than they

monks an' friars in the picter-books wi' ropes round their waistses an' bald crowns, which ain't no sign to me o' bein' full o' grace, but rather loss of 'air,—an' which you will presently see yourself, Miss, as 'ow Mr. Walden's done the church beautiful, like a dream, as all the visitors sez, which there isn't its like in all England—an' he's jest a father to the village an' friends with every man, woman, an' child in it, an' grudges nothink to 'elp in cases desarvin', an' works like a nigger, he do, for the school, which if he'd 'ad a wife it might a' been better an' it might a' been worse, the Lord only knows, for no woman would a' come up 'ere an' stood that patient watchin' me an' my work, an' I tell you truly, Miss Maryllia, that when your boxes came an' I had to unpack 'em an' sort the clothes in 'em, I sent for Passon Walden jest to show 'im that I felt my 'sponsibility, an' he sez, sez he: 'You go on doin' your duty, Missis Spruce, an' your lady will be all right'—an' though I begged 'im to stop, he wouldn't while I was a-shakin' out your dresses with Nancy——"

Here she was interrupted by a ringing peal of laughter from Maryllia, who, running up to her, put a little hand on her mouth.

"Stop, stop, Spruce!" she exclaimed—"Oh dear, oh dear! Do you think I can understand all this? Did you show the parson my clothes—actually? You did!" For Mrs. Spruce nodded violently in the affirmative. "Good gracious! What a perfectly dreadful thing to do!" And she laughed again. "And what is the saint in the Sarky?" Here she removed her hand from the mouth she was guarding. "Say it in one word, if you can,—what is the Sarky?"

"It's in the church,"—said Mrs. Spruce, dauntlessly proceeding with her flow of narrative, and encouraged thereto by the sparkling mirth in her mistress's face—"We calls it Sarky for short. Josey Letherbarrow, what reads, an' 'as larnin', calls it the Sarky Fagus, an' my Kitty, she's studied at the school, an' *she* sez 'it's Sar-KO-fagus, mother,' which it may be or it mayn't, for the schools don't know more than the public-'ouses in my opinion,—leastways it's a great long white coffin what's

supposed to 'ave the body of a saint inside it, an Mr Walden he discovered it when he was rebuildin' the church, an' when the Bishop come to conskrate it, he sez 'twas a saint in there an' that's why the village is called St. Rest—but you'll find it all out yourself, Miss, an' as I sez an' I don't care who 'ears me, the real saint ain't in the Sarky at all,—it's just Mr. Walden himself,——"

Again Maryllia's hand closed her mouth.

"You really must stop, Spruce! You are the dearest old gabbler possible—but you must stop! You'll have no breath left—and I shall have no patience! I've heard quite enough. I met Mr. Walden this morning, and I'm sure he isn't a saint at all! He's a very ordinary person indeed,—most ordinary—not in the very least remarkable. I'm glad he's good to the people, and that they like him—that's really all that's necessary, and it's all I want to know. Go along, Spruce!—don't talk to me any more about saints *in* the Sarky or *out* of the Sarky! There never was a real saint in the world—never!—not in the shape of a man!"

With laughter still dancing in her eyes, she turned away, and Mrs. Spruce, in full possession of restored nerve and vivacity, bustled off on her round of household duty, the temporary awe she had felt concerning the new written code of domestic 'Rules and Regulations' having somewhat subsided under the influence of her mistress's gay good-humour. And Maryllia herself, putting on her hat, called Plato to her side, and started off for the village, resolved to make the church her first object of interest, in order to see the wondrous 'Sarky.'

"I never was so much entertained in my life!" she declared to herself, as she walked lightly along,—her huge dog bounding in front of her and anon returning to kiss her hand and announce by deep joyous barks his delight at finding himself at liberty in the open country—"Spruce is a perfect comedy in herself,—ever so much better than a stage play! And then the quaint funny men who came to see me last night,—and those village boys this morning! And the 'saintly' parson! I'm sure he'll turn out to be comic too,—in a way—he'll be

the 'heavy father' of the piece! Really I never imagined I should have so much fun!"

Here, spying a delicate pinnacle gleaming through the trees, she rightly concluded that it belonged to the church she intended to visit, and finding a footpath leading across the fields, she followed it. It was the same path which Walden had for so many years been accustomed to take in his constant walks to and from the Manor. It soon brought her to the highroad which ran through the village, and across this it was but a few steps to the gate of the churchyard. Laying one hand on her dog's neck, she checked the great creature's gambols and compelled him to walk sedately by her side, as with hushed footsteps she entered the 'Sleepy Hollow' of death's long repose, and went straight up to the church door which, as usual, stood open.

"Stay here, Plato!" she whispered to her four-footed comrade, who, understanding the mandate, lay down at once submissively in the porch to wait her pleasure.

Entering the sacred shrine she stood still,—awed by its exquisite beauty and impressive simplicity. The deep silence, the glamour of the soft vari-coloured light that flowed through the lancet windows on either side,—the open purity of the nave, without any disfiguring pews or fixed seats to mar its clear space,—(for the chairs which were used at service were all packed away in a remote corner out of sight)—the fair, slender columns, springing up into flowering capitals, like the stems of palms breaking into leaf-coronals,—the dignified plainness of the altar, with that strange white sarcophagus set in front of it,—all these taken together, composed a picture of sweet sanctity and calm unlike anything she had ever seen before. Her emotional nature responded to the beautiful in all things, and this small perfectly designed House of Prayer, with its unknown saintly occupant at rest within its walls, touched her almost to tears. Stepping on tip-toe up to the altar-rails, she instinctively dropped on her knees, while she read all that could be seen of the worn inscription on the sarcophagus from that side—'In Resurrectione—Sanctorum

—Resurget.' The atmosphere around her seemed surcharged with mystical suggestions,—a vague poetic sense of the superhuman and divine moved her to a faint touch of fear, and made her heart beat more quickly than its wont.

"It is lovely—lovely!" she murmured under her breath, as she rose from her kneeling attitude—"The whole church is a perfect gem of architecture! I have never seen anything more beautiful in its way,—not even the Chapel of the Thorn at Pisa. And according to Mrs. Spruce's account, the man I met this morning—the quizzical parson with the grey-brown curly-locks, did it all at his own expense—he must really be quite clever,—such an unusual thing for a country clergyman!"

She took another observant survey of the whole building, and then went out again into the churchyard. There she paused, her dog beside her, shading her eyes from the sun as she looked wistfully from right to left across the sadly suggestive little hillocks of mossy turf besprinkled with daisies, in search of an object which was as a landmark of disaster in her life.

She saw it at last, and moved slowly towards it,—a plain white marble cross, rising from a smooth grassy eminence, where a rambling rose, carefully and even artistically trained, was just beginning to show pale creamy buds among its glossy dark green leaves. Great tears rose to her eyes and fell unheeded, as she read the brief inscription—'Sacred to the Memory of Robert Vancourt of Abbot's Manor,' this being followed by the usual dates of birth and death, and the one word 'Resting.' With tender touch Maryllia gathered one leaf from the climbing rose foliage, and kissing it amid her tears, turned away, unable to bear the thoughts and memories which began to crowd thickly upon her. Almost she seemed to hear her father's deep mellow voice which had been the music of her childhood, playfully saying as was so often his wont:—"Well, my little girl! How goes the world with you?" Alas, the world had gone very ill with her for a long, long time after his death! Hers was too loving and passionately clinging a nature to find easy consolation for such a loss. Her uncle Frederick,

though indulgent to her and always kind, had never filled her father's place,—her uncle Frederick's American wife, had, in spite of much conscientious tutelage and chaperonage, altogether failed to win her affection or sympathy. The sorrowful sense that she was an orphan, all alone as it were with herself to face the mystery of life, never deserted her,—and it was perhaps in the most brilliant centres of society that this consciousness of isolation chiefly weighed upon her. She saw other girls around her with their fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters,—but she—she, by the very act of being born had caused her mother's death,—and she well knew that her father's heart, quietly as he had endured his grief to all outward appearances, had never healed of that agonising wound.

"I think I should never have come into the world at all,"—she said to herself with a sigh, as she returned over the fields to the Manor—"I am no use to anybody,—I never have been of any use! Aunt Emily says all I have to do to show my sense of proper feeling and gratitude to her for her care of me is to marry—and marry well—marry Lord Roxmouth, in short—he will be a duke when his father dies, and Aunt Emily would like to have the satisfaction of leaving her millions to enrich an English dukedom. Nothing could commend itself more favourably to her ideas—only it just happens my ideas won't fit in the same groove. Oh dear! Why can't I be 'amenable' and become a future duchess, and 'build up' the fortunes of a great family? I don't know I'm sure,—except that I don't feel like it! Great families don't appeal to me. I shouldn't care if there were none left. They are never interesting at the best of times,—perhaps out of several of them may come one clever man or woman,—and all the rest will be utter noodles. It isn't worth while to marry Roxmouth on such dubious grounds of possibility!"

Entering the Manor, she was conscious of some fatigue and listlessness,—a touch of depression weighed down her naturally bright spirits. She exchanged her home-spun walking dress for a tea-gown, and descended somewhat languidly to the morning-room where tea was served with more ceremonious-

ness than on the previous day, Primmins having taken command, with the assistance of the footman. Both men-servants stole respectful glances at their mistress, as she sat pensively alone at the open window, looking out on the verdant landscape that spread away from the terrace, in undulations of lawn, foliage and field to the last border of trees that closed in Abbot's Manor grounds from the public highway. Both would have said had they been asked, that she was much too pretty and delicate to be all alone in the great old house, with no companion of her own age to exchange ideas with by speech or glance,—and, with that masculine self-assurance which is common to all the lords of creation, whether they be emperors or household domestics, they would have opined that 'she ought to be married.' In which they would have entirely agreed with Maryllia's 'dragon,' Aunt Emily. But Maryllia's own mind was far from being set on such themes as love and marriage. Her meditations were melancholy, and not unmixed with self-reproach. She blamed herself for having stayed away so long from her childhood's home, and her father's grave.

"I might have visited it at least once a year!" she thought with sharp compunction—"I never really forgot,—why did I *seem* to forget?"

The sun was sinking slowly in a glory of crimson and amber cloud, when, having resolved upon what she was going to do, she entered the picture-gallery. Softly she trod the polished floor,—with keen quick instinct and appreciative eyes, she noted the fine Vandyke portraits,—the exquisite Greuze that shone out, star-like, from a dark corner of the panelled walls,—and walking with measured pace she went straight up to the picture of 'Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt'—and gazed at it with friendly and familiar eyes.

"I know you quite well!"—she said, addressing the painted beauty—"I have often dreamed about you since I left home! I always admired you and wanted to be like you. I remember when I must have been about seven or eight years old, I ran in from a game in the garden one summer's afternoon, and I

knelt down in front of you and I said: 'Pray God make little Maryllia as pretty as big Mary Elia!' And I think,—I really *do* think—though of course I'm not half or quarter as pretty, I'm just a little like you! Just a very very little! For instance my hair is the same colour—almost—and my eyes—no! I'm sure I haven't such beautiful eyes as yours—I wish I had!"

Her lovely ancestress appeared to smile,—if she could have spoken from the canvas that held her image she might have said:—"You have eyes that mirror the sunshine,—you have life, and I am dead,—your day is still with you—mine is done! For me love and the world's delight are ended,—and whither my phantom fairness has fled, who knows! But you are a vital breathing essence of beauty—be glad and rejoice in it while you may!"

Some thought of this kind would have suggested itself to an imaginative beholder had such an one stood by to compare the picture with its almost twin living copy. Maryllia however had a very small stock of vanity,—she was only pleasantly aware that she possessed a certain grace and fascination not common to the ordinary of her sex, but beyond that, she rated her personal charms at very slight value. The portrait of Mary Elia Adelgisa made her more seriously discontented with herself than ever,—and after closely studying the picturesque make of the violet velvet riding-dress which the fair one of Charles the Second's day had worn, and deciding that she would have one 'created' for her own adornment exactly like it, she turned towards the other end of the gallery. There hung that preciously guarded mysterious portrait of her dead mother, which she herself had never gazed upon, covered close with its dark green baize curtain,—a curtain no hand save her father's had ever dared to raise. She remembered how often he had used to enter here all alone and lock the doors, remaining thus in sorrow and solitude many hours. She recalled her own childish fears when, by chance running in to look at the pictures for her own entertainment, or to play with her ball on a rainy day for the convenience of space and a lofty ceiling, she was suddenly checked and held in awe by the sight of that great gilded

frame enshrining the, to her, unknown presentment of a veiled Personality. Her father alone was familiar with the face hidden behind that covering which he had put up with his own hands,—fastening it by means of a spring pulley, which in its turn was secured to the wall by lock and key. Ever since his death Maryllia had worn that key on a gold chain hidden in her bosom, and she drew it out now with a beating heart and many tremors of hesitation. The trailing folds of her pretty tea-gown, all of the filmiest old lace and ivory-hued cashmere, seemed to make an obtrusive noise as they softly swept the floor,—she felt almost as though she were about to commit a sacrilege and break open a shrine,—yet——

"I must see her!" she said, whisperingly;—"I shall not offend her memory. I have never done anything very wrong in my life,—if I had, I should have reason to be afraid—or ashamed,—and then of course wouldn't dare to look at her. I have often been silly and frivolous and thoughtless,—but never spiteful or malicious, or really wicked. I could meet my father if he were here, just as frankly as if I were still a little girl,—and I think he would wish me to see his Dearest now! His Dearest! He always called her that!"

With the breath coming and going quickly through her parted lips, she stepped slowly and timidly up to that corner in the wall behind the picture, where the fastenings of the spring pulley were concealed, and fitted the key into the padlock which guarded it. The light of the setting sun threw a flame of glory aslant through the windows, and filled the gallery with a warm rush of living colour and radiance; and as she removed the padlock, and came to the front of the picture to pull the curtain-cord, she stood, unconsciously to herself, in a pure halo of gold, which intensified the brown and amber shades of her hair and the creamy folds of her gown, so that she resembled 'an angel newly drest, save wings, for heaven,' such as one may see delineated on the illuminated page of some antique missal. Her hand trembled, as at the first touch on the pulley the curtain began to move,—inch by inch it ascended, showing pale glimmerings of white and rose,—still

higher it moved, giving to the light a woman's beautiful hand, so delicately painted as to seem almost living. The hand held a letter,—and plainly on the half unfolded scroll could be read the words:

"Thine till death,
ROBERT VANCOURT."

Another touch, and the whole covering rolled up swiftly to its full height,—while Maryllia breathless with excitement and interest gazed with all her soul in her eyes at the exquisite, dreamy, poetic loveliness of the face disclosed. All the beauty of girlhood with the tenderness of womanhood,—all the visions of young romance, united to the fulfilled passion of the heart,—all the budding happiness of a radiant life,—all the promise of a perfect love;—these were faithfully reflected in the purely moulded features, the dark blue caressing eyes, and the sweet mouth, which to Maryllia's fervid imagination appeared to tremble plaintively with a sigh of longing for the joy of life that had been snatched away so soon. Arrayed in simplest white, with a rose at her breast, and her husband's letter clasped in her hand, the fair form of the young bride that never came home gathered from the sunset-radiance an aspect of life, and seemed to float forth from the dark canvas like a holy spirit of beauty and blessing. Shadow and Substance—dead mother and living child—these twain gazed on each other through cloud-veils of impenetrable mystery,—nor is it impossible to conceive that some intangible contact between them might, through the transference of a thought, a longing, a prayer, have been realised at that mystic moment. With a sudden cry of irresistible emotion Maryllia stretched out her arms, and dropping on her knees, broke out into a passion of tears.

"Oh mother, mother!" she sobbed—"Oh darling mother! How I would have loved you!"

CHAPTER XII

IN such wise, under the silent benediction of the lost and loving dead, the long-deserted old Manor received back the sole daughter of its ancestry to that protection which we understand, or did understand at one time in our history, as 'Home.' Home was once a safe and sacred institution in England. There seemed no likelihood of its ever being supplanted by the public restaurant. That it has, in a great measure, been so supplanted, is no advantage to the country, and that many women, young and old, prefer to be seen in gregarious over-dressed hordes, taking their meals in Piccadilly eating-houses, rather than essay the becoming grace of a simple and sincere hospitality to their friends in their own homes, is no evidence of their improved taste or good breeding. Abbot's Manor was in every sense 'Home' in the old English sense of the word. Its ancient walls, hallowed by long tradition, formed a peaceful and sweet harbour of rest for a woman's life,—and the tranquil dignity of her old-world surroundings with all the legends and memories they awakened, soon had a beneficial effect on Maryllia's impressionable temperament, which, under her aunt's 'social' influence, had been more or less chafed and uneasy. She began to feel at peace with herself and all the world,—while the relief she experienced at having deliberately severed herself by both word and act from the undesired attentions of a too-persistent and detested lover in the person of Lord Roxmouth, future Duke of Ormistoune, was as keen and pleasurable as that of a child who has run away from school. She was almost confident that the fact of

her having thrown off her aunt's protection together with all hope of inheriting her aunt's wealth, would be sufficient to keep him away from her for the future. "For it is Aunt Emily's money he wants—not me;" she said to herself—"He doesn't care a jot about me personally—any woman will do, provided she has the millions. And when he knows I've given up the millions, and don't intend ever to have the millions, he'll leave me alone. And he'll go over to America in search of somebody else—some proud daughter of oil or pork or steel!—and what a blessing that will be!"

Meanwhile, such brief excitement as had been caused in St. Rest by the return of 'th' owld Squire's gel' and by the almost simultaneous dismissal of Oliver Leach, had well-nigh abated. A new agent had been appointed, and Leach had left the immediate vicinity, though having employment on Sir Morton Pippitt's lands, he had secured a cottage for himself in the small outlying hamlet of Badsworth. He also undertook some work for the Reverend 'Putty' Leveson in assisting him to form an entomological collection for the private museum at Badsworth Hall. Mr. Leveson had a singular fellow-feeling for insects,—he studied their habits, and collected specimens of various kinds in bottles, or 'pinned' them on cardboard trays,—he was an interested observer of the sprightly manners practised by the harvest-bug, and the sagacious customs of the ruminating spider,—as well as the many surprising and agreeable talents developed by the common flea. Leach's virulent hatred of Maryllia Vancourt was not lessened by the apparently useful and scientific nature of the employment he had newly taken up under the guidance of his reverend instructor,—and whenever he caught a butterfly and ran his murderous pin through its quivering body at Leveson's bland command, he thought of her, and wished vindictively that she might perish as swiftly and utterly as the wingëd lover of the flowers. Every small bright thing in Nature's garden that he slew and brought home as trophy, inspired him with the same secret fierce desire. The act of killing a beautiful or harmless creature gave him pleasure, and he did

not disguise it from himself. The Reverend 'Putty' was delighted with his aptitude, and with the many valuable additions he made to the 'specimen' cards and bottles, and the two became constant companions in their search for fresh victims among the blossoming hedgerows and fields. St. Rest, as a village, was only too glad to be rid of Leach's long detested presence to care anything at all as to his further occupations or future career,—and only Bainton kept as he said 'an eye on him.'

Bainton was a somewhat curious personage,—talkative as he showed himself on most occasions, he was both shrewd and circumspect; no stone was more uncommunicative than he when he chose. In his heart he had set Maryllia Vancourt as second to none save his own master, John Walden,—her beauty and grace, her firm action with regard to the rescue of the 'Five Sisters,' and her quick dismissal of Oliver Leach, had all inspired him with the most unbounded admiration and respect, and he felt that he now had a double interest in life, —the 'Passon'—and the 'Lady of the Manor.' But he found very little opportunity to talk about his new and cherished theme of Miss Vancourt and Miss Vancourt's many attractions to Walden,—for John always 'shut him up' on the subject with quite a curt and peremptory decision whenever he so much as mentioned her name. Which conduct on the part of one who was generally so willing to hear and patient to listen, somewhat surprised Bainton.

"For," he argued—"there ain't much doin' in the village, —we ain't always 'on the go'—an' when a pretty face comes among us, surely it's worth looking at an' pickin' to pieces as 'twere. But Passon's that sharp on me when I sez any little thing wot might be interestin' about the lady, that I'm thinkin' he's got out o' the habit o' knowin' when a face is a male or a female one, which is wot often happens to bacheldors when they gits fixed like old shrubs in one partikler spot o' ground. Now I should a' said he'd a' bin glad to 'ear of somethin' new an' oncommon as 'twere,—he likes it in the way o' flowers, an' why not in the way o' wimmin?

But Passon ain't like other folk—he don't git on with wimmin nohow—an' the prettier they are the more he seems skeered off them."

But such opinions as Bainton entertained concerning his master, he kept to himself, and having once grasped the fact that any mention of Miss Vancourt's ways or Miss Vancourt's looks appeared to displease rather than to entertain the Reverend John, he avoided the subject altogether. This course of action on his part, if the truth must be told, was equally annoying to Walden, who was in the curious mental condition of wishing to know what he declined to hear.

For the rest, the village generally grew speedily accustomed to the presence of the mistress of the Manor. She had fulfilled her promise of paying a visit to Josey Letherbarrow, and had sat with the old man in his cottage, talking to him for the better part of two hours. Rumour asserted that she had even put the kettle on the fire for him, and had made his tea. Josey himself was reticent,—and beyond the fact that he held up his head with more dignity, and showed a touch of more conscious superiority in his demeanour, he did not give himself away by condescending to narrate any word of the lengthy interview that had taken place between himself and 'th' owld Squire's little gel.' One remarkable thing was noticed by the villagers and commented upon,—Miss Vancourt had now passed two Sundays in their midst, and had never once attended church. Her servants were always there at morning service, but she herself was absent. This occasioned much whispering and head-shaking in the little community, and one evening the subject was openly discussed in the bar-room of the 'Mother Huff' by a group of rustic worthies whose knowledge of matters theological and political was, by themselves, considered profound. Mrs. Buggins had started the conversation, and Mrs. Buggins was well known to be a lady both pious and depressing. She presided over her husband's 'public' with an air of meek resignation, not unmixed with sorrowful protest,—she occasionally tasted the

finer cordials in the bar-room, and was often moved to gentle tears at the excellence of their flavour,—she had a chronic 'stitch in the side,' and a long smooth pale yellow countenance from which the thin grey hair was combed well back from the temples in the frankly unbecoming fashion affected by the provincial British matron. She began her remarks by plaintively opining that "it was a very strange thing not to see Miss Vancourt at church on either of the Sundays that had passed since her return—very strange! Perhaps she was 'High'? Perhaps she had driven into Riversford to attend the 'processional' service of the Reverend Francis Anthony?"

"Perhaps she ain't done nothing of the sort!"—growled a thick-set burly farmer, who with a capacious mug of ale before him was sucking at his pipe with as much zeal as a baby at its bottle—"Ef you cares for my 'pinion, which m'appen you doan't, she's neither Low nor 'Igh. She's no Seck. If she b'longed to a Seck, she wouldn't be readin' on a book under the Five Sisters last Sunday marnin' when the bells was a-ringin' for church time. I goes past 'er, an' I sez 'Marnin', mum!' an' she looks up smilin'-like, an' sez she: 'Good-marnin'! Nice day, isn't it?' 'Splendid day, mum,' sez I, an' she went on readin', an' I went on a walkin'. I sez then, and I sez now, she ain't no Seck!"

"Example," sighed Mrs. Buggins, "is better than precept. It would be more decent if the lady showed herself in church as a lesson to others,—if *she* did so more lost sheep might follow!"

"Hor-hor-hor!" chuckled Bainton, from a corner of the room—"Don't you worrit yourself, Missis Buggins, 'bout no lost sheep! Sheep allus goes where there's somethin' to graze upon,—leastways that's my 'sperience, an' if there ain't no grazin' there ain't no sheep! An' them as grazes on Passon Walden, gittin' out of 'im all they can to 'elp 'em along, wouldn't go to church, no more than Miss Vancourt do, if they didn't know wot a man 'e is to be relied on in times o' trouble, an' a reg'ler 'usband to the parish in

sickness an' in 'elth, for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, till death do 'im part. Miss Vancourt don't want nothin' out of 'im as all we doos,—an' she kin show 'er independence ef she likes to by stayin' away from church when she fancies, an' readin' books instead of 'earin' sermons,—there ain't no harm in that."

"I'm not so sure that I agree with you, Mr. Bainton,"—said a stout, oily-looking personage, named Netlips, the grocer and 'general store' dealer of the village, a man who was renowned in the district for the profundity and point of his observations at electoral meetings, and for the entirely original manner in which he 'used' the English language; "Public worship is a necessary evil. It is a factor in vulgar civilisations. Without it, the system of religious politics would fall into cohesion,—absolute cohesion!" And he rapped his fist on the table with a smartness that made his hearers jump. "At the last meeting I addressed in this division, I said we must support the props. The aristocracy must bear them on their shoulders. If your Squire stays away from church, he may be called a heathen with propriety, though a Liberal. And why? Because he makes public exposure of himself as a heathen negative! He is bound to keep up the church factor in the community. Otherwise he runs straight aground on Cohesion."

This oratorical outburst on the part of Mr. Netlips was listened to with respectful awe and admiration.

"Ay, ay!" said Roger Buggins, who as 'mine host' stood in his shirt sleeves at the entrance of his bar, surveying his customers and mentally counting up their reckonings—"Cohesion would never do—cohesion government would send the country to pieces. You're right, Mr. Netlips,—you're right! Props must be kep' up!"

"I don't see no props in goin' to church,"—said Dan Ridley, the little working tailor of the village—"I goes because I likes Mr. Walden, but if there was a man in the pulpit I didn't like, I'd stop away. There's a deal too many wolves in sheep's clothing getting ordained in the

service o' the Lord, an' I don't blame Miss Vancourt if so be she takes time to find out the sort o' man Mr. Walden is before settin' under him as 'twere. She can say prayers an' read 'em too in her own room, an' study the Bible all right without goin' to church. Many folks as goes to church reg'ler are downright mean lyin' raskills—and don't never read their Bibles at all. Mebbe they does as much harm as what Mr. Netlips calls Cohesion, though I don't myself purfess to understand Government language, it bein' too deep for me."

Mr. Netlips smiled condescendingly, and nodded as one who should say—'You do well, my poor fellow, to be humble in my presence!'—and buried his nose in his tankard of ale.

"Mebbe Cohesion's got hold o' my red cow"—said the burly farmer, who had spoken before—"For she's as ailin' as ever she was, an' if I lose her, I loses a bit o' my livin'. An' that's what I sez an' 'olds by, no church-goin' seems to 'elp us in a bit o' trouble, an' it ain't decent or Christian like, so it 'pears, to pray to the Almighty for the savin' of a cow. I asked Passon Walden if 'twould be right, for the cow's as valuable to me as ever my wife was when she was alive, if not more, an' he sez quite pleasant-like—'Well no, Mr. Thorpe, I think it best not to make any sort of special prayer for the poor beast, but just do all you can for it, and leave the rest to Providence. A cow is worldly goods, you see—and we're not quite justified in praying to be allowed to keep our worldly goods.' 'Ain't we?' I sez—'Is that a fact?' He smiled and said it was. So I thanked him and comed away. But I've been thinkin' it over since, an' I sez to myself—ef we ain't to pray for keepin' an' 'avin' our worldly goods, wot 'ave we got to pray for?"

"Oh Mr. Thorpe!" ejaculated Mrs. Buggins, almost tearfully—"It is not this world but the next, that we must think of! We must pray for our souls!"

"Well, marm, I ain't got a 'soul' wot I knows on—an' as for the next world, if there ain't no cattle farmin' there,

I reckon I'll be out o' work. Do you count on keepin' a bar in the 'eavenly country?"

A loud guffaw went the round of the room, and Mrs. Buggins gasped with horror.

"Oh, Roger!" she murmured, addressing her portly spouse, who at once took up the argument.

"You goes too fur—you goes too fur, Mr. Thorpe!" he said severely—"There ain't no keepin' bars nor farmin' carried on in the next world, nor marrying nor givin' in marriage. We be all as the angels there."

"A nice angel you'll make too, Mr. Buggins!" said Farmer Thorpe, as he sent his tankard to be refilled,—"Lord! We won't know you!"

Again the laugh went round, and Mrs. Buggins precipitately retired to her 'inner parlour' there to recover from the shock occasioned to her religious feelings by the irreverent remarks of her too matter-of-fact customer. Meanwhile Dan Ridley, the tailor, had again reverted to the subject of Miss Vancourt.

"There's one thing about her comin' to church,"—he said; "If so be as she did come it 'ud do us all good, for she's real pleasant to look at. I've seen her a many times in the village."

"Ah, so have I!" chorussed two or three more men.

"She's been in to see Adam Frost's children an' she gave Baby Hippolyta a bag o' sweeties,"—said Bainton. "An' she's called at the schoolhouse, but Miss Eden, she worn't in, an' Susie Prescott saw her, an' Susie was that struck that she 'adn't a wurrd to say, so she tells us, an' Miss Vancourt she went to old Josey Letherbarrow's straight away an' there she stayed iver so long. She ain't called at our house yet."

"Which 'ouse might you be a-meanin', Tummas?" queried Farmer Thorpe, with a slow grin—"Your own or your measter's?"

"When we speaks in the plural we means not one, but two,"—rejoined Bainton with dignity. "An' when I sez 'our' I means myself an' Passon, which Miss Vancourt ain't as yet left her card on Passon. He went up in a great 'urry

one afternoon when he knowed she was out,—he knowed it, 'cos I told 'im as 'ow I'd seen her gallopin' by on that mare of hers which they calls Cleopatra—an' away 'e run like a March 'are, an' he ups to the Manor and down again, an' sez he, laughin' like: 'I've done my dooty by the lady' sez he—'I've left my card!' That was three days ago, an' there ain't been no return o' the perliteness up to the present——"

Here he broke off and began to drink his ale, as a small dapper man entered the bar-room with a brisk step and called for 'a glass of home-brewed,' looking round on those assembled with a condescending smile. All of them knew him as Jim Bennett, Miss Vancourt's groom.

"Well, mates!" he said with a sprightly air of familiarity—"All well and hearty?"

"*As* yourself, Mr. Bennett,"—replied Roger Buggins, acting as spokesman for the rest, and personally serving him with the foaming draught he had ordered. "Which we likewise trusts your lady is well?"

"My lady enjoys the best of health, thank you!" said Bennett, with polite gravity. And tossing off the contents of his glass, he signified by an eloquent gesture and accompanying wink, that he was 'good for another.'

"We was just a-sayin' as you come in, Mr. Bennett," observed Dan Ridley, "that we'd none of us seen your lady at church yet on Sundays. Mebbe she ain't of our 'persuasion' as they sez, or mebbe she goes into Riversford, preferrin' 'Igh services——"

Bennett smiled a superior smile, and leaning easily against the bar, crossed his legs and surveyed the company generally with a compassionate air.

"I suppose it's quite a business down here,—goin' to church, eh?" he queried—"Sort of excitement like—only bit of fun you've got—helps to keep you all alive! That's the country way, but Lord bless you!—in town we're not taking any!"

Bainton looked up,—and Mr. Netlips loosened his collar and lifted his head, as though preparing himself for another

flow of 'cohesion' eloquence. Farmer Thorpe turned his bull-neck slowly round, and brought his eyes to bear on the speaker.

"How d'ye make that out, Mr. Bennett?" he demanded. "Doan't ye sarve the A'mighty same in town as in country?"

"Not a bit of it!" replied Bennett airily—"You're a long way behind the times, Mr. Thorpe!—you are indeed, beggin' your pardon for sayin' so! The 'best' people have given up the Almighty altogether, owing to recent scientific discoveries. They've taken to the Almighty Dollar instead which no science can do away with. And Sundays aren't used any more for church-going, except among the middle-class population,—they're just Bridge days with *our* set—Bridge lunches, Bridge suppers,—every Sunday's chock full of engagements to 'Bridge,' right through the 'season.'"

"That's cards, ain't it?" enquired Dan Ridley.

"Just so! Harmless cards!" rejoined Bennett—"Only you can chuck away a few thousands or so on 'em if you like!"

Mr. Netlips here pushed aside his emptied ale-glass and raised his fat head unctuously out of his stiff shirt-collar.

"Are we to understand,"—he began ponderously "that Miss Vancourt is addicted to this fashion of procrastinating the Lord's Day?"

Bennett straightened his dapper figure suddenly.

"Now don't you put yourself out, Mr. Netlips, don't, that's a good feller!" he said in sarcastically soothing tones—"There's no elections going on just at present—when there is you can bring your best leg foremost, and rant away for all you're worth! My lady don't gamble, if that's what you mean,—though she's always with the swagger set, and likely so to remain. But you keep up your spirits!—your groceries 'ull be paid for all right!—she don't run up no bills—so don't you fear, cards or no cards! And as for procrastinating the Lord's Day, whatever that may be, I could name to you the folks what does worse than play Bridge on Sundays. And who are they? Why the clergymen theirselves! And how does they do worse? Why by tellin' lies as fast as they can stick! They says we're all going to heaven if we're good,

—and they don't know nothing about it,—and we're all going to hell if we're bad, and they don't know nothing about that neither! I tell you, as I told you at first, in town we've got beyond all that stuff—we're just not taking any!"

He paused, and there was a deep silence, while he drank off his second glass of ale. The thoughts of every man present were apparently too deep for words.

"You're a smart chap!" said Bainton at last, breaking the mystic spell and rising to take his leave—"An' I don't want to argify with ye, for I 'spect you're about right in what you sez about Sunday ways in town—but I tell ye what, young feller!—you've got to 'ave a deal o' patience an' a deal o' pity for they poor starveling sinners wot gits boxed up in cities an' never ain't got no room to look at the sky, or see the wide fields with all the daisies blowin' open to the sun. No wonder they're so took up wi' their scinetific muddlins over worms an' microbes an' sich-like, as to 'ave forgot what the Almighty is doin' in the workin' o' the Universe,—but it's onny jest like poor prisiners in a cell wot walks up an' down, up an' down, countin' the stones in the wall with scinetific multiplication-like, an' 'splainin' to their poor lonely selves as how many stones makes a square foot, an' so many square feet makes a square yard, an' on they goes a-walkin' their mis'able little round an' countin' their mis'able little sums, an' all the time just outside the prison the flowers is all bloomin' wild an' the birds singin', an' the blue sky over it all with God smilin' behind it. That's 'ow 'tis, Mr. Bennett!" and Bainton looked into the lining of his cap as was his wont before he put it on his head—"I believe all you say right enough, an' it don't put me out nohow—I've seen too much o' natur to be shook off my 'old on the Almighty—for there's no worm wot ain't sure of a rose or some kind o' flower an' fruit somewhere, though m'appen the poor blind thing don't know where to find it. It's a care o' leadin' on, an' guidin' beyond our knowledge, Mr. Bennett,—an' that's wot Passon Walden tells us. *He* don't bother us wi' no 'hows' nor 'whys' nor 'wherefores'—he says we can *feel* God with us in our

daily work, an' so we can, if we've a mind to! Daily work and common things shows Him to us,—why look there!"—here he pulled from his pocket a small paper-bag, and opening it, showed some dry loose seed—"There ain't nothin' commoner than that! That's pansy seed—a special stock too,—well now, if you didn't know how common it is, wouldn't it seem a miracle as wonderful as any in the Testymen, that out o' that handful o' dust like, the finest flowers of purple an' yellow will come?—ay! some o' them two to three inches across, an' every petal like velvet an' silk! If so be you don't b'lieve in a God, Mr. Bennett, owin' to town opinions, you try the gardenin' business! That'll make a man of ye! I allus sez if Adam had stuck to the gardenin' business an' left the tailorin' trade alone we'd have all been in Eden now!"

His eyes twinkled, as glancing round the company, he saw that his words had made an impression and awakened a responsive smile—"Good-night t'ye!" And touching Bennett on the shoulder in passing, he added: "You come an' see me, my lad, when you feels like goin' a bit in the scinetific line! Mebbe I can tell ye a few pints wot the learned gentlemen in London don't know. Anyway, a little church-goin' under Passon Walden won't do you no 'arm, nor your lady neither, if she's what I takes her for, which is believin' her to be all good as wimmin goes. An' when Passon warms to his work an' tells ye plain as 'ow everything's ordained for the best, an' as 'ow every flower's a miracle of the Lord, an' every bird's song a bit o' the Lord's own special music, it 'eartens ye up an' makes ye more 'opeful o' your own poor mis'able self—it do reely now!"

With another friendly pat on the groom's shoulder, and a cheery smile, Bainton passed out, and left the rest of the company in the 'Mother Huff' tap-room solemnly gazing upon one another.

"He speaks straight, he do!" said Farmer Thorpe, "An' he ain't no canter,—he's just plain Tummas, an' wot he sez he means."

"Here's to his 'elth,—a game old boy!" said Bennett good-humouredly, ordering another glass of ale; "It's quite a treat

to meet a man like him, and I sha'n't be above owning that he's got a deal of right on his side. But what he says ain't Orthodox Church teaching."

"Mebbe not," said Dan Ridley, "but it's Passon Walden's teachin', an' if you ain't 'eard Passon yet, Mr. Bennett, I'd advise ye to go next Sunday. An' if your lady 'ud make up her mind to go too just for once——"

Bennett gave an expressive gesture.

"She won't go—you may depend on that!" he said; "She's had too much of parsons as it is. Why Mrs. Fred—that's her American aunt—was regular pestered with 'em coming beggin' of her for their churches and their windows and their schools and their infants and their poor, lame, blind, sick of all sorts, as well as for theirselves. D'rectly they knew she was a millionaire lady, they 'adn't got but one thought—how to get some of the millions out of her. There was three secretaries kept when we was in London, and they'd hardly time for bite nor sup with all the work they 'ad, refusin' scores of churches and religious folks all together. Miss Maryllia's got a complete scare o' parsons. Whenever she see a shovel-hat coming she just flew! When she was in Paris it was the Catholics as wanted money—nuns, sisters of the poor, priests as 'ad been turned out by the Government,—and what not,—and out in America it was the Christian Scientists all the time with such a lot of tickets for lectures and fal-lals as you never saw,—then came the Spiritooalists with their seeances; and altogether the Vancourt family got to look on all sorts of religions merely as so many kinds of beggin' boxes which if you dropped money into, you went straight to the Holy-holies, and if you didn't you dropped down into the great big D's. No!—I don't think anyone need expect to see my lady at church—it's the last place she'd ever think of going to!"

This piece of information was received by his hearers with profound gravity. No one spoke, and during the uncomfortable pause Bennett gave a careless 'Good-night!'—and took his departure.

"Things is come to a pretty pass in this 'ere country," then

said Mr. Netlips grandiosely, "when the woman who is merely the elevation of the man, exhibits in public a conviction to which her status is unfitted. If the lady who now possesses the Manor were under the submission of a husband, he would naturally assume the control which is governmentally retaliative and so compel her to include the religious considerations of the minority in her communicative system!"

Farmer Thorpe looked impressed, but slightly puzzled.

"You sez fine, Mr. Netlips,—you sez fine," he observed respectfully. "Not that I altogether understands ye, but that's onny my want of book-larnin' and not spellin' through the dictionary as I oughter when I was a youngster. Howsomever I makes bold to guess wot you're drivin' at and I dessay you may be right. But I'm fair bound to own that if it worn't for Mr. Walden, I shouldn't be found in church o' Sundays neither, but lyin' flat on my back in a field wi' my face turned up to the sun, a-thinkin' of the goodness o' God, and hopin' He'd put a hand out to 'elp make the crops grow as they should do. Onny Passon he be a rare good man, and he do speak to the 'art of ye so wise-like and quiet, and that's why I goes to hear him and sez the prayers wot's writ for me to say and doos as he asks me to do. But if I'd been unfort'nit enough to live in the parish of Badsworth under that old liar Leveson, I'd a put my fist in his jelly face 'fore I'd a listened to a word he had to say! Them's my sentiments, mates!—and you can read 'em how you like, Mr. Netlips. God's in heaven we know,—but there's onny churches on earth, an' we 'as to make sure whether there's men or devils inside of 'em 'fore we goes kneelin' and grubbin' in front of 'uman idols—Good-night t'ye!"

With these somewhat disjointed remarks Farmer Thorpe strode out of the tap-room, whistling loudly to his dog as he reached the door. The heavy tramp of his departing feet echoed along the outside lane and died away, and Roger Buggins, glancing at the sheep-faced clock in the bar, opined that it was 'near closin' hour.' All the company rose and began to take their leave.

"Church or no church, Miss Vancourt's a real lady!" declared Dan Ridley emphatically—"She may have her reasons, an' good ones too, for not attending service, but she ain't no heathen, I'm sartin sure o' that."

"You cannot argumentarially be sure of what you do not know," said Mr. Netlips, with a tight smile, buttoning on his overcoat—"A heathen is a proscription of the law, and cannot enjoy the rights of the commons."

Dan stared.

"There ain't no proscription of the law in stayin' away from church," he said—"Nobody's bound to go. Lords nor commons can't compel us."

Mr. Netlips shook his head and frowned darkly, with the air of one who could unveil a great mystery if he chose.

"Compulsion is a legal community," he said—"And while powerless to bring affluence to the Christian conscience, it culminates in the citizenship of the heathen. Miss Vancourt, as her father's daughter, should be represented by the baptized spirit, and not by the afflatus of the ungenerate! Good-night!"

Still puckering his brow into lines of mysterious suggestiveness, the learned Netlips went his way, Roger Buggins gazing after him admiringly.

"That man's reg'ler lost down 'ere,"—he observed—"He oughter ha' been in Parliament."

"Ah, so he ought!" agreed Dan Ridley—"Where there's fog he'd a made it foggier, and where there's no understandin' he'd a made it less understandable. I daresay he'd a bin Prime Minister in no time—he's just the sort. They likes a good old muddler for that work—someone as has the knack o' addlin' the people's brains an' makin' them see a straight line as though 'twere crooked. It keeps things quiet an' yet worrity-like—first up, then down—this way, then that way, an' never nothin' certain, but plenty o' big words rantin' round. That's Netlips all over,—it's in the shape of his 'ed,—he was born like it. I don't like his style myself,—but he'd make a grand cab'nit minister!"

"Ay, so he would!" acquiesced Buggins, as he drew the

little red curtains across the windows of the tap-room and extinguished the hanging lamp—"Easy rest ye, Dan!"

"Same to you, Mr. Buggins!" responded the tailor cheerfully, as he turned out into the cool sweet dimness of the hawthorn-hedged lane in which the 'Mother Huff' stood—"I make bold to say that church or no church, Miss Vancourt's bein' at her own 'ouse 'ull be a gain an' a blessing to the village."

"Mebbe so," returned Buggins laconically,—and closing his door he barred it across for the night, while Dan Ridley, full of the half-poetic, half-philosophic thoughts which the subjects of religion and religious worship frequently excite in a more or less untutored rustic mind, trudged slowly homeward.

During these days, Maryllia herself, unconscious of the remarks passed upon her as the Lady of the Manor by her village neighbours, had not been idle, nor had she suffered much from depression of spirits, though, socially speaking, she was having what she privately considered in her own mind 'rather a dull time.' To begin with, everybody in the neighbourhood that was anybody in the neighbourhood, had called upon her,—and the antique oaken table in the great hall was littered with a snowy array of variously shaped bits of pasteboard, bearing names small and great,—names of old county families,—names of new mushroom gentry,—names of clergymen and their wives in profusion, and one or two modest cards with the plain 'Mr.' of the only young bachelors anywhere near for fifteen miles round. Nearly every man had a wife—"Such a pity!" commented Maryllia, when noting the fact—"One can never ask any of them to dinner without their dragons!"

Most of the callers had paid their 'duty visits' at a time of the afternoon when she was always out,—roaming over her own woods and fields, and 'taking stock' as she said, of her own possessions,—but on one or two occasions she had been caught 'in,' and this was the case when Sir Morton Pippitt, accompanied by his daughter Tabitha, Mr. Julian Adderley, and Mr. Marius Longford were announced just at the apt and

fitting hour of 'five-o'clock tea.' Rising from the chair where she had negligently thrown herself to read for a quiet half hour, she set aside her book, and received those important personages with the careless ease and amiable indifference which was a 'manner familiar' to her, and which invariably succeeded in making less graceful persons than she was, feel wretchedly awkward and unhappy about the management of their hands and feet. With a smiling upward and downward glance, she mastered Sir Morton Pippitt's 'striking and jovial personality,'—his stiffly-carried upright form, large lower chest, close-shaven red face, and pleasantly clean white hair,—"The very picture of a Bone-Melter"—she thought—"He looks as if he had been boiled all over himself—quite a nice well-washed old man,"—her observant eyes flashed over the attenuated form of Julian Adderley with a sparkle of humour,—she noticed the careful carelessness of his attire, the artistic 'set' of his ruddy locks, the eccentric cut of his trousers, and the, to himself, peculiar knot of his tie.

"The poor thing wants to be something out of the common and can't quite manage it," she mentally decided, while she viewed with extreme disfavour the feline elegance affected by Mr. Marius Longford, and the sleek smile, practised by him 'for women only,' with which he blandly admitted her existence. To Miss Tabitha Pippitt she offered a chair of capacious dimensions, amply provided with large down cushions, inviting her to sit down in it with a gentleness which implied kindly consideration for her years and for the fatigue she might possibly experience as a result of the drive over from Badsworth Hall,—whereat the severe spinster's chronically red nose reddened more visibly, and between her thin lips she sharply enunciated her preference for 'a higher seat,—no cushions, thank you!' Thereupon she selected the 'higher seat' for herself, in the shape of an old-fashioned music-stool, without back or arm-rest, and sat stiffly upon it like a draper's clothed dummy put up in a window for public inspection. Maryllia smiled,—she knew that kind of woman well;—and paying only the most casual attention to her for the rest of the time,

returned to her own place by the open windows and began to dispense the tea, while Sir Morton Pippitt opened conversation by feigning to recall having met her some two or three years back. He was not altogether in the best of humours, the sight of his recently dismissed butler, Primmins, having upset his nerves. He knew how servants 'talked.' Who could tell what Primmins might not say in his new situation at Abbot's Manor, of his former experiences at Badsworth Hall? And so it was with a somewhat heated countenance that Sir Morton endeavoured to allude to a former acquaintance with his hostess at a Foreign Office function.

"Oh no, I don't think so," said Maryllia, lazily dropping lumps of sugar into the tea-cups—"Do you take sugar? I ought to ask, I know,—such a number of men have the gout nowadays, and they take saccharine. I haven't any saccharine,—so sorry! You do like sugar, Mr. Adderley? How nice of you!" And she smiled. "None for you, Mr. Longford? I thought not. You, Miss Pippitt? No! Everybody else, yes? That's all right! The Foreign Office? I think not, Sir Morton,—I gave up going there long ago when I was quite young. My aunt, Mrs. Fred Vancourt, always went—you must have met her and taken her for me. I always hated a Foreign Office 'crush.' Such big receptions bore one terribly—you never see anybody you really want to know, and the Prime Minister always looks tired to death. His face is a study in several agonies. Two or three years ago? Oh no,—I don't think I was in London at that time. And you were there, were you? Really!"

She handed a cup of tea with a bewitching smile and a 'Will you kindly pass it?' to Julian Adderley, who so impetuously accepted the task she imposed upon him of acting as general waiter to the company, that in hastening towards her he caught his foot in the trailing laces of her gown and nearly fell over the tea-tray.

"A thousand pardons!" he murmured, righting himself with an effort—"So clumsy of me!"

"Don't mention it!" said Maryllia, placidly—"Will you

hand bread-and-butter to Miss Pippitt? Do you take hot cake, Sir Morton?"

Sir Morton's face had become considerably redder during this interval, and, as he spread his handkerchief out on one knee to receive the possible dribblings of tea from the cup he had begun to sip at somewhat noisily, he looked as he certainly felt, rather at a loss what next to say. He was not long in this state of indecision however, for a bright idea occurred to him, causing a smile to spread among his loose cheek-wrinkles.

"I'm sorry my friend the Duke of Lumpton has left me," he said with unctuous pomp. "He would have been delighted—er—delighted to call with me to-day——"

"Who is he?" enquired Maryllia, languidly.

Again Sir Morton reddened, but managed to conceal his discomfiture in a fat laugh.

"Well, my dear lady, he is Lumpton!—that is enough for him, and for most people——"

"Really?—Oh—well—of course!—I suppose so!" interrupted Maryllia, with an expressive smile, which caused Miss Tabitha's angular form, perched as it was on the high music-stool, to quiver with spite, and moved Miss Tabitha's neatly gloved fingers to clench like a cat's claws in their kid sheaths with an insane desire to scratch the fair face on which that smile was reflected.

"He is a charming fellow, the Duke—charming—charming!" went on Sir Morton, unconscious of the complex workings of thought in his elderly daughter's acidulated brain; "And his great 'chum,' Lord Mawdenham, has also been staying with us—but they left Badsworth yesterday, I'm sorry to say. They travelled up to London with Lady Elizabeth Messing, who paid us a visit of two or three days——"

"Lady Elizabeth Messing!" echoed Maryllia, with a sudden ripple of laughter—"Dear me! Did you have her staying with you? How very nice of you! She is such a terror!"

Mr. Marius Longford stroked one of his pussy-cat whiskers thoughtfully, and put in his word.

"Lady Elizabeth spoke of you, Miss Vancourt, several times;"—he said—"In fact"—and he smiled—"she had a good deal to say! She remembers meeting you in Paris, and—if I mistake not—also at Homburg on one occasion. She was surprised to hear you were coming to live in this dull country place—she said it would never suit you at all—you were altogether too brilliant—er—" he bowed—"and er—charming!" This complimentary phrase was spoken with the air of a beneficent paterfamilias giving a child a bon-bon.

Maryllia's glance swept over him carelessly.

"Much obliged to her, I'm sure!" she said—"I can quite imagine the anxiety she felt concerning me! So good of her! Is she a great friend of yours?"

Mr. Longford looked slightly disconcerted.

"Well no," he replied—"I have only during these last few days—through Sir Morton—had the pleasure of her acquaintance——"

"Mr. Longford is not a 'society' man!" said Sir Morton, with a chuckle—"He lives on the heights of Parnassus—and looks down with scorn on the browsing sheep in the valleys below! He is a great author!"

"Indeed!" and Maryllia raised her delicately arched eyebrows with a faint movement of polite surprise—"But all authors are great nowadays, aren't they? There are no little ones left."

"Oh yes indeed and alas, there are!" exclaimed Julian Adderley, flourishing his emptied tea-cup in the air before setting it back in its saucer and depositing the whole on a table before him; "I am one of them, Miss Vancourt! Pray be merciful to me!"

The absurd attitude of appeal he assumed moved Maryllia to a laugh.

"Well, when you look like that I guess I will!" she said playfully, not without a sense of liking for the quaint human creature who so willingly made himself ridiculous without being conscious of it—"What is your line in the small way?"

"Verse!" he replied, with tragic emphasis—"Verse which nobody reads—verse which nobody wants—verse which whenever it struggles into publication, my erudite friend here, Mr. Longford, batters into pulp with a sledge-hammer review of half-a-dozen lines in the heavier magazines. Verse, my dear Miss Vancourt!—verse written to please myself, though its results do not feed myself. But what matter! I am happy! This village of St. Rest, for example, has exercised a spell of enchantment over me. It has soothed my soul! So much so, that I have taken a cottage in a wood—how melodious that sounds!—at the modest rent of a pound a week. That much I can afford,—that much I will risk—and on the air, the water, the nuts, the berries, the fruits, the flowers, I will live like a primæval man, and let the baser world go by!" He ran his fingers through his long hair. "It will be an experience! So new—so fresh!"

Miss Tabitha sniffed sarcastically, and gave a short, hard laugh.

"I hope you'll enjoy yourself!" she said tartly—"But you'll soon tire. I told you at once when you said you had decided to spend the summer in this neighbourhood that you'd regret it. You'll find it very dull."

"Oh, I don't think he will!" murmured Maryllia graciously; "He will be writing poetry all the time, you see! Besides, with you and Sir Morton as neighbours, how *can* he feel dull? Won't you have some more tea?"

"No thank you!" and Miss Pippitt rose—"Father, we must be going. You have not yet explained to Miss Vancourt the object of our visit."

"True, true!" and Sir Morton got out of his chair with some difficulty—"Time flies fast in such fascinating company!" and he smiled beamingly—"We came, my dear lady, to ask you to dine with us on Thursday next at Badsworth Hall." No words could convey the pomposity which Sir Morton managed to infuse into this simple sentence. To dine at Badsworth was, or ought to be, according to his idea, the utmost height of human bliss and ambition. "We will invite

some of our most distinguished neighbours to meet you,—there are a few of the old stock left—" this as if he were of the 'old stock' himself;—"I knew your father—poor fellow!—and of course I remember seeing you as a child, though you don't remember me—ha-ha!—but I shall be delighted to welcome you under my roof——"

"Thanks so much!" said Maryllia, demurely—"But please let it be for another time, will you? I haven't a single evening disengaged between this and the end of June! So sorry! I'll come over to tea some day, with pleasure! I know Badsworth. Dear old place!—quite famous too, once in the bygone days—almost as famous as Abbot's Manor itself. "Let me see!" and she looked up at the ceiling musingly—"There was a Badsworth who fought against the Commonwealth,—and there was another who was Prime Minister or something of that kind,—then there was a Sir Thomas Badsworth who wrote books—and another who did some wonderful service for King James the First—yes, and there were some lovely women in the family too—I suppose their portraits are all there? Yes—I thought so!"—this as Sir Morton nodded a blandly possessive affirmative—"How things change, don't they? Poor old Badsworth! So funny to think you live there! Oh yes! I'll come over—certainly I'll come over,—some day!"

Thus murmuring polite platitudes, Maryllia bade her visitors adieu. Sir Morton conquered an inclination to gasp for breath and say 'Damn!' at the young lady's careless refusal of his invitation to dinner,—Miss Tabitha secretly rejoiced.

"I'm sure I don't want her at Badsworth," she said within herself, viciously—"Nasty, little insolent conceited thing! I believe her hair is dyed, and her complexion put on! A regular play-actress!"

Unconscious of the spinster's amiable thoughts, Maryllia was holding out a hand to her.

"Good-bye!" she said—"So kind of you to come and see me! I'm sure you think I must be lonely here. But I'm not, really! I don't think I ever shall be,—because as soon as I

have got the house quite in order, I am going to ask a great many friends to stay with me in turn. They will enjoy seeing the old place, and country air is such a boon to London people! Good-bye!"—and here she turned to Marius Longford—"I'm afraid I haven't read any of your books!—anyway I expect they would be too deep for me. Wouldn't they?"

"Lord Roxmouth has been good enough to express his liking for my poor efforts," he replied, with a slight covert smile—"I believe you know him?"

"Oh quite well—quite too well!" said Maryllia, without any discomposure—"But what he likes, I always detest. Unfortunate, isn't it? So I mustn't even try to read your works! You, Mr. Adderley"—and she laughingly looked up at that gentleman who, hat in hand, was pensively drooping in a farewell attitude before her,—"you are going to stop here all summer, aren't you? And in a cottage! How delightful! Anywhere near the Manor?"

"I am not so happy as to have found a domicile on this side Eden!" murmured Adderley, with a languishing look—"My humble hut is set some distance apart,—about a mile beyond the rectory."

"Then your best neighbour will be the parson," said Maryllia, gaily—"So improving to your morals!"

"Possibly—possibly!" assented Adderley—"Mr. Walden is not exactly like other parsons,—there is something wonderfully attractive about him——"

"Something wonderfully conceited and unbearable you mean!" snapped out Sir Morton—"Come, come!—we must be off! The horses are at the door,—can't keep them standing! Miss Vancourt doesn't want to hear anything about the parson. She'll find him out soon enough for herself. He's an upstart, my dear lady—take my word for it!—a pretentious University prig and upstart! You'll never meet *him* at Badsworth!—ha-ha-ha! Never! Sorry you can't dine on Thursday! Never mind, never mind! Another time! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" and with a slight further exchange of salutations Maryllia found herself relieved of her visitors. Of all the four,

Adderley alone looked back with a half-appealing smile, and received an encouraging little nod for his pains—a nod which said 'Yes—you can come again if you like!' The wheels of the Pippitt equipage crunched heavily down the drive, and as the grating sound died away, clear on the quiet air came the soft slow chime of the church-bells ringing. It was near sunset,—and Walden sometimes held a short simple service of evening prayer at that hour. Leaning against the open window Maryllia listened.

"How pretty it is!" she said—"It must be the nearness of the river that makes the tone of the bells so soft and mellow! Oh, what an insufferable old snob that Pippitt is! And what a precious crew of 'friends' he boasts of! Lumpton, who, when he was a few years younger, danced the skirt-dance in women's clothes for forty pounds a night at a New York restaurant!—Mawdenham, who pawned all his mother's jewels to pay his losses at Bridge—and Lady Elizabeth Messing, who is such an abandoned old creature that her own married daughters won't know her! Oh dear! And I believe the Knighted Bone-Boiler thinks they are quite good style! That literary man, Longford, was a most unprepossessing looking object,—a friend of Roxmouth's too, which makes him all the more unpleasant. And of course he will at once write off and say he has seen me. And then—and then—dear me! I wonder where Sir Morton picks these people up! He doesn't like the parson here evidently—'a pretentious University prig and upstart'—what a strong way of putting it!—very strong for such a clean-looking old man! 'A pretentious University prig and upstart' are you, Mr. Walden!" Here, smiling to herself, she moved out into the garden and called her dog to her side—"Do you hear that, Plato? Our next-door neighbour is a prig as well as a parson!—isn't it dreadful!" Plato looked up at her with great loving brown eyes and wagged his plumy tail. "I believe he is,—and yet—yet all the same, I think—yes!—I think, as soon as a convenient opportunity presents itself, I'll ask him to dinner."

CHAPTER XIII

THE next day Maryllia was up betimes, and directly after breakfast she sent for Mrs. Spruce. That good lady, moved by the summons into sudden trepidation, lest some duty had been forgotten, or some clause of the household 'rules and regulations' left unfulfilled, hastened to the inner library, a small octagonal room communicating with the larger apartment, and there found her mistress sitting on a low stool, with her lap full of visiting-cards which she was busily sorting.

"Spruce!" and she looked up from her occupation with a mock tragic air—"I'm dull! Positively D U double L! DULL!"

Mrs. Spruce stared,—but merely said:

"Lor, Miss!" and folded her hands on her apron, awaiting the next word.

"I'm dull, dull, dull!" repeated Maryllia, springing up and tossing all the cards into a wide wicker basket near at hand—"I don't know what to do with myself, Spruce! I've got nobody to talk to, nobody to play with, nobody to sing to, nobody to amuse me at all, at all! I've seen everything inside and outside the Manor,—I've visited the church,—I know the village—I've talked to dear old Josey Letherbarrow till he must be just tired of me,—he's certainly the cleverest man in the place,—and yesterday the Pippitts came and finished me. I'm done! I throw up the sponge!—that's slang, Spruce! There's nobody to see, nowhere to go, nothing to do. It's awful! 'The time is out of joint, O cursëd spite!' That's Hamlet. Something must *happen*, Spruce!"—and here she executed a playful

pas-seul around the old housekeeper—"There! Isn't that pretty? Don't look so astonished!—you'll see ever so much worse than that by and bye! I'm going to have company. I am, really! I shall fill the house! Get all the beds aired, and all the bedrooms swept out! I shall ask heaps of people,—all the baddest, maddest folks I can find! I want to be bad and mad myself! There's nobody bad or mad enough to keep me going down here. Look at these!" And she raked among the visiting-cards and selected a few. "Listen!—'Miss Ittlethwaite, Miss Agnes Ittlethwaite, Miss Barbara Ittlethwaite, Miss Christina Ittlethwaite, Ittlethwaite Park.' It makes my tongue all rough and funny to read their names! They've called,—and I suppose I shall have to call back, but I don't want to. What's the good? I'm sure I shall never get on with the Ittlethwaites,—we shall never never agree! Do you know them, Spruce? Who are they?"

Mrs. Spruce drew a long breath, rolled up her eyes, and began:

"Which the Misses Ittlethwaite is a county fam'ly, Miss, livin' some seven or eight miles from here as proud as proud, owin' to their forebears 'avin' sworn death on Magnum Chartus for servin' of King John—an' Miss Ittlethwaite proper, she be gettin' on in years but she's a great huntin' lady, an' come November is allus to be seen follerin' the 'ounds, stickin' to the saddle wonderful for 'er size an' time o' life, an' Miss Barbara, she doos a lot o' sick visitin, an' Bible readin', not 'ere, for our people won't stand it, an' Passon Walden ain't great on breakin' into private 'ouses without owners' consents for Bible readin', but she, she's 'Igh, an' tramps into Riversford near every day which the carrier's cart brings 'er 'ome to 'er own place they 'avin' given up a kerridge owin' to spekylation in railways, an' Miss Hagnes she works lovely with 'er needle, an' makes altar cloths an' vestis for Mr. Francis Anthony, the 'Igh Church clergyman at Riversford, he not bein' married, though myself I should say there worn't no chance for 'er, bein' frightful skinny an' a bit off in 'er looks—an' Miss Christina she do still play at bein' a baby like, she's the

youngest, an' over forty, yet quite a giddy in 'er way, wearin' ribbins round 'er waist, an' if 'twarn't for 'er cheeks droppin' in long like, she wouldn't look so bad, but they're all that proud——'

"That'll do, Spruce, that'll do!" cried Maryllia, putting her hands to her ears—"No more Ittlethwaites, please, for the present! Sufficient for the day is the Magnum Chartus thereof! Who comes here?" and she read from another card,—"'Mrs. Mordaunt Appleby.' Also a smaller label which says 'Mr. Mordaunt Appleby'! More county family pride or what?"

"Oh lor no, Miss, Mordaunt Appleby's only the brewer of Riversford," said Mrs. Spruce, casually. "He's got the biggest 'ouse in the town, but people remembers 'im when he was a very shabby lot indeed,—an awful shabby lot. *He* ain't nobody, Miss—he's just got a bit o' money which makes the commoner sort wag tails for 'im, but it's like his cheek to call 'ere at all. Sir Morton Pippitt, bein' in the bone-meltin' line, 'as 'im up to dine now an' agin, just to keep in with 'im like, for he's a nasty temper, an' his wife's got the longest and spite-fullest tongue in all the neighbourhood. But you needn't take up wi' them, Miss—they ain't in your line,—which some brewers is gentlemen, an' Appleby ain't—*your* Pa wouldn't never know *his* Pa."

"Then that's settled!" said Maryllia, with a sigh of relief, "Depart, Mordaunt Applebys into the limbo of forgotten callers!"—and she tossed the cards aside—"Here are the Pippitt names,—I shall remember them all right—Pippitt and Ittlethwaite have a tendency to raise blisters of memory on the brain. What is this neat looking little bit of pasteboard—'The Rev. John Walden.' Yes!—he called two or three days ago when I was out."

Mrs. Spruce sniffed a sniff of meaning, but said nothing.

"I've not been to church yet"—went on Maryllia meditatively, "I daresay he thinks me quite a dreadful person. But I hate going to church,—it's so stupid—so boresome—and oh!—such a waste of time!"

Mrs. Spruce still held her peace. Maryllia gave her a little

side-glance and noted a certain wistfulness and wonder in the rosy, wrinkled face which was not without its own pathos.

"I suppose everybody about here goes to church at least once on Sundays," pursued Maryllia—"Don't they?"

"Them as likes Mr. Walden goes,"—answered Mrs. Spruce promptly—"Them as don't, stops away. Sir Morton Pippitt used allus to attend 'ere reg'ler when the buildin' was nowt but ruin, an' 'e 'ad a tin roof put over it,—'e was that proud o' the tin roof you'd a' thought 'twas made o' pure gold, an' he was just wild when Mr. Walden pulled it all off an' built up the walls an' roof again as they should be all at 'is own expense, an' he went away from the place for sheer spite like, an' stayed abroad a whole year, an' when 'e come back again 'e never wouldn't go nigh it, an' now 'e attends service at Badsworth Church,—Badsworth Barn we calls it,—for 'tain't nowt but a barn which Mr. Leveson keeps 'Igh as 'Igh with a bit o' tinsel an' six candles, though it's the mis'ablest place ye ever set eyes on, an' 'e do look a caution 'isself with what 'e calls a vestiment 'angin' down over 'is back, which is a back as fat as porpuses, the Lord forgive me for sayin' it, but Sir Morton 'e be that set against Mr. Walden he'll rather say 'is prayers in a pig-stye with a pig for the minister than in our church, since it's been all restored an' conskrated—then, as I told you just now, Miss, the Ittlethwaites goes to Riversford where they gits opratick music with the 'Lord be merciful to us mis'able sinners'—an' percessions with candles,—so our church is mostly filled wi' the village folks, farmer bodies an' sich-like, —there ain't no grand people what comes, though we don't miss 'em, for Passon 'e don't let us want for nothin' an' when there's a man out o' work, or a woman sick, or a child what's pulin' a bit, an' ricketty, he's allus ready to 'elp, with all 'e 'as an' welcome, payin' doctors' fees often,—an' takin' all the medicine bills on 'isself besides. Ah, 'e's a rare good sort is Passon Walden, an' so you'd say yerself, Miss, if ever you took on your mind to go and hear 'im preach, an' studied 'is ways for a bit as 'twere an' asked 'bout 'im in the village, for 'e's fair an' open as the day an' ain't got no

sly sneaky tricks in 'im,—he's just a man, an' a good one—an' that's as rare a thing to find in this world as a di'mond in a wash-tub, an' makin' so bold, Miss, if you'd onny go to church next Sunday——"

Maryllia interrupted her by a little gesture.

"I can't, Spruce!" she said, but with great gentleness—"I know it's the right and proper thing for me to do in the country if I wish to stand well with my neighbours,—but I can't! I don't believe in it,—and I won't pretend that I believe!"

Poor Mrs. Spruce felt a sudden choking in her throat, and her motherly face grew red and pale by turns. Miss Maryllia, the old Squire's daughter, was—what? A heathen?—an unbeliever—an atheist? Oh, surely it was not possible—it could not be!—she would not accept the idea that a creature so dainty and pretty, so fair and winsome, could be cast adrift on the darkness of life without any trust in the saving grace of the Christian Faith! Limited as were Mrs. Spruce's powers of intelligence, she was conscious enough that there would be something sweet and strong lost out of the world, which nothing could replace, were the message of Christ withdrawn from it. The perplexity of her thoughts was reflected on her countenance and Maryllia, watching her, smiled a little sadly.

"You mustn't think I don't believe in God, Spruce,"—she said slowly—"I do! But I can't agree with all the Churches teach about Him. They make Him out to be a cruel, jealous and revengeful Being——"

"Mr. Walden don't,—" put in Mrs. Spruce quickly.

"And I like to think of Him as all love and pity and goodness," went on Maryllia, not heeding her—"and I don't say prayers, because I think He knows what is best for me without my asking. Do you understand? So it's really no use my going to church, unless just out of curiosity—and perhaps I will some day do that,—I'll see about it! But I must know Mr. Walden a little better first,—I must find out for myself what kind of a man he is, before I make up my mind to endure such a martyrdom as listening to a sermon!

I simply loathe sermons! I suppose I must have had too many of them when I was a child. Surely you remember, Spruce, that I used to be taken into Riversford to church?"

Mrs. Spruce nodded emphatically in the affirmative. "Yes!—because when father was alive the church here was only a ruin. And I used to go to sleep over the sermons always—and once I fell off my seat and had to be carried out. It was dreadful! Now Uncle Fred never went to church,—nor Aunt Emily. So I've quite got out of the way of going—nobody is very particular about it in Paris or London, you see. But perhaps I'll try and hear Mr. Walden preach—just once—and I'll tell you then what I think about it. I'll put his card on the mantelpiece to remind me!"

And she suited the action to the word, Mrs. Spruce gazing at her in a kind of mild stupefaction. It seemed such a very odd thing to stick up a clergyman's card as a reminder to go to church 'just once' some Sunday!

Meanwhile Maryllia continued,—"Now, Spruce, you must begin to be busy! You must prepare the Manor for the reception of all sorts of people, small and great. I feel that the time has come for 'company, company!' And in the first place I'm going to send for Cicely Bourne,—she's my pet 'genius'—and I'm paying the cost of her musical education in Paris. She's an orphan—like me,—she's all alone in the world—like me;—and we're devoted to each other. She's only a child—just over fourteen—but she's simply a wonder!—the most wonderful musical wonder in the world!—and she has a perfectly marvellous voice. Her master Gigue says that when she is sixteen she will have emperors at her feet! Emperors! There are only a few,—but they'll all be grovelling in the dust before her! You must prepare some pretty rooms for her, Spruce; those two at the top of the house that look right over the lawn and woods—and make everything as cosy as you can. I'll put the finishing touches. And I must send to London for a grand piano. There's only the dear old spinet in the drawing-room,—it's sweet to sing to, and Cicely will love it,—but she must have a glorious 'grand' as well.

I shall wire to her to-day,—I know she'll come at once. She will arrive direct from Paris,—let me see!"—and she paused meditatively—"when can she arrive? This is Friday,—yes!—probably she will arrive here Sunday or Monday morning. So you can get everything ready."

"Very well, Miss," and Mrs. Spruce, with the usual regulation 'dip' of respectful submission to her mistress was about to withdraw, when Maryllia called her back and handed over to her care the wicker basket full of visiting-cards.

"Put them all by,"—she said—"When Cicely comes we'll go through them carefully together, and discuss what to eat, drink and avoid. Till then, I shall blush unseen, wasting my sweetness on the desert air! Time enough and to spare for making the acquaintance of the 'county.' Who was it that said: 'Never know your neighbours'? I forget,—but he was a wise man anyway!"

Mrs. Spruce 'dipped' a second time in silence, and was then allowed to depart on her various household duties. The good woman's thoughts were somewhat chaotically jumbled, and most fervently did she long to send for 'Passon,' her trusted adviser and chief consoler, or else go to him herself and ask him what he thought concerning the non-church-going tendencies of her mistress. Was she altogether a lost sheep? Was there no hope for her entrance into the heavenly fold?

"Which I can't and won't believe she's wicked,"—said Mrs. Spruce to herself—"With that sweet childie face an' eyes she couldn't be! M'appen 'tis bad example,—'er 'Merican aunt 'avin no religion as 'twere, an' 'er uncle Mr. Frederick was never no great shakes in 'is young days if all the truth was told. Well, well! The Lord 'e knows 'is own, an' my 'pinion is He ain't a-goin' to do without Miss Maryllia, for it's allus 'turn again, turn again, why will 'ee die' sort of thing with Him, an' He don't give out in 'is patience. I'm glad she's goin' to 'ave a friend to stay with 'er,—that'll do 'er good and 'earten 'er up—an' mebbe the friend 'll want to go to church, an' Miss Maryllia 'ull go with 'er, an' once they listens to Passon 'twill be all right, for 'is voice do draw you up into

a little bit o' heaven somehow, whether ye likes it or not, an' if Miss Maryllia once 'ears 'im, she'll be wantin' to 'ear 'im again—so it's best to leave it all in the Lord's 'ands which makes the hills straight an' the valleys crooked, an' knows what's good for both man and beast. Miss Maryllia ain't goin' to miss the Way, the Truth an' the Life—I'm sartin sure o' that!"

Thus Mrs. Spruce gravely cogitated, while Maryllia herself, unaware of the manner in which her immortal destinies were being debated by the old housekeeper, put on her hat, and ran gaily across the lawn, her great dog bounding at her side, making for the usual short-cut across the fields to the village. Arrived there she went straight to the post-office, a curious little lop-sided half-timbered cottage with a projecting window, wherein, through the dusty close-latticed panes could be spied various strange edibles, such as jars of acidulated drops, toffee, peppermint balls, and barley-sugar—likewise one or two stray oranges, some musty-looking cakes, a handful or so of old nuts, and slabs of chocolate protruding from shining wrappers of tin-foil,—while a flagrant label of somebody's 'Choice Tea' was suspended over the whole collection, like a flag of triumph. The owner of this interesting stock-in-trade and the postmistress of St. Rest, was a quaint-looking little woman, very rosy, very round, very important in her manner, very brisk and bright with her eyes, but very slow with her fingers.

"Which I gets the rheumatiz so bad in my joints," she was wont to say—"that I often wonders 'ow I knows postage-stamps from telegram-forms an' register papers from money-orders, an' if you doos them things wrong Gove'nment never forgives ye!"

"Ah, you'll never get into no trouble with Gove'nment, Missis Tapple!" her gossips were wont to assure her, "For you be as ezack as ezack!"

A compliment which Mrs. Tapple accepted without demur, feeling it to be no more than her just due. She was, however, in spite of her 'ezack' methods, always a little worried when

anything out of the ordinary occurred, and she began to feel slightly flustered directly she saw Maryllia swing open her garden gate. She had already, during the last few days, been at some trouble to decipher various telegrams which the Lady of the Manor had sent down by Primmins for immediate despatch, such as one to a certain Lord Roxmouth which had run as follows:—"No time to reply to your letter. In love with pigs and poultry."

"It *is* 'pigs and poultry,' ain't it?" she had asked anxiously of Primmins, after studying the message for a considerable time through her spectacles. And Primmins, gravely studying it too, had replied:—

"It is undoubtedly 'pigs and poultry.'"

"And it *is* 'in love' you think?" pursued Mrs Tapple, with perplexity furrowing her brow.

"It is certainly 'in love',"—rejoined Primmins, and the faintest suggestion of a wink affected his left eyelid.

Thereupon the telegram was 'sent through' to Riversford on its way to London, though not without serious misgivings in Mrs. Tapple's mind as to whether it might not be returned with a 'Gove'nment' query as to its correctness. And now, when Maryllia herself entered the office, and said smilingly, "Good-morning! Some foreign telegram-forms please!" Mrs. Tapple felt that the hour was come when her powers of intelligence were about to be tried to the utmost; and she accordingly began to experience vague qualms of uneasiness.

"Foreign telegram-forms, Miss? Is it for Ameriky?"

"Oh no!—only for Paris,"—and while the old lady fumbled nervously in her 'official' drawer, Maryllia glanced round the little business establishment with amused interest. She had a keen eye for small details, and she noticed with humorous appreciation Mrs. Tapple's pink sun-bonnet hanging beside the placarded 'Post Office Savings Bank' regulations, and a half side of bacon suspended from the ceiling, apparently for 'curing' purposes, immediately above the telegraphic apparatus. After a little delay, the required pale yellow 'Foreign and Colonial' forms were found, and Mrs. Tapple

carefully flattened them out, and set them on her narrow office counter.

"Will you have a pencil, or pen and ink, Miss?" she enquired.

"Pen and ink, please," replied Maryllia; whereat the old postmistress breathed a sigh of relief. It would be easier to make out anything at all 'strange and uncommon' in pen and ink than in pencil-marks which had a trick of 'rubbing.' Leaning lightly against the counter Maryllia wrote in a clear bold round hand:

"Miss Cicely Bourne,
"17, Rue Croisie, Paris.

"Come to me at once. Shall want you all summer. Have wired Gigue. Start to-morrow.

"Maryllia Vancourt."

She pushed this over to Mrs. Tapple, who thankfully noting that she was writing another, took time to carefully read and spell over every word, and mastered it all without difficulty. Meanwhile Maryllia prepared her second message thus:

"Louis Gigue,
"Conservatoire, Paris.

"Je désire que Cicely passe l'été avec moi et qu'elle arrive immédiatement. Elle peut très-bien continuer ses études ici. Vous pouvez suivre, cher maître, à votre plaisir.

"Maryllia Vancourt."

"It's rather long,"—she said thoughtfully, as she finished it, "But for Gigue it is necessary to explain fully. I hope you can make it out?"

Poor Mrs. Tapple quivered with inward agitation as she took the terrible telegram in hand, and made a brave effort to rise to the occasion.

"Yes, Miss," she stammered—"Louis Gigue—G. i. g. u. e. that's right—yes—at the Conservatory, Paris."

"No, no!" said Maryllia, with a little laugh—"Not Conservatory—Conservatoire—*toire*, t. o. i. r. e. the place where they study music."

"Oh yes—I see!" and Mrs. Tapple tried to smile knowingly, as she fixed her spectacles more firmly on her nose, and began to murmur slowly—"Je désire, d. e. sire—oh yes—desire!—que—q. u. e.—Cicely—yes that's all right!—passe, an e to pass—yes—now let me wait a minute!—one minute, Miss, if you please!—l'été—l apostrophe e, stroke across the e,—t, and e, stroke across the e——"

Maryllia's eyebrows went up in pretty perplexity.

"Oh dear, I'm afraid you won't be able to get it right that way" she said—"I had better write it in English,—why, here's Mr. Walden!" This, as she saw the clergyman's tall athletic figure entering Mrs. Tapple's tiny garden,—"Good-morning, Mr. Walden!" and as he raised his hat, she smiled graciously—"I want to send off a French telegram, and I'm afraid it's rather difficult——"

A glance at Mrs. Tapple explained the rest, and Walden's eyes twinkled mirthfully.

"Perhaps *I* can be of some use, Miss Vancourt,"—he said; "Shall I try?"

Maryllia nodded, and he walked into the little office.

"Let me send off those telegrams for you, Mrs. Tapple,"—he said—"You know you often allow me to amuse myself in that way! I haven't touched the instrument for a month at least, and am getting quite out of practice. May I come in?"

Mrs. Tapple's face shone with relief and gladness.

"Well now, Mr. Walden, if it isn't a real blessin' that you happened to look in this mornin'!" she exclaimed—"For now there won't be no delay,—not but what I knew a bit o' French as a gel, an' I'd 'ave made my way to spell it out somehow no matter how slow,—but there! you're that handy that 'twon't take no time, an' Miss Vancourt will be sure of her message 'avin' gone straight off from here correct,—an' if they makes mistakes at Riversford, 'twon't be my fault!"

While she thus ran on, Walden was handling the telegraphic

apparatus. His back was turned to Maryllia, but he felt her eyes upon him,—as indeed they were,—and there was a slight flush of colour in his bronzed cheeks as he presently looked round and said:

"May I have the telegram?"

"There are two—both for Paris," replied Maryllia, handing him the filled-up forms—"One is quite easy—in English."

"And the other quite difficult—in French!"—he laughed, "Let me see if I can make it out correctly." Thereupon he read aloud: "'Louis Gigue, Conservatoire, Paris. Je désire que Cicely passe l'été avec moi et qu'elle arrive immédiatement. Elle peut très-bien continuer ses études ici. Vous pouvez suivre, cher maître, à votre plaisir.' Is that right?"

Maryllia's eyes opened a little more widely,—like blue flowers wakening to the sun. This country clergyman's pronunciation of French was perfect,—more perfect than her own trained Parisian accent. Mrs. Tapple clasped her dumpy red hands in a silent ecstasy of admiration. 'Passon' knew everything!

"Is it right?" Walden repeated.

Maryllia gave a little start.

"Oh I beg your pardon! Yes—quite right!—thank you ever so much!"

Click-click-click-click! The telegraphic apparatus was at work, and the unofficial operator was entirely engrossed in his business. Mrs. Tapple stood respectfully dumb and motionless, watching him. Maryllia, leaning against the ledge of the office counter watched him too. She took quiet observation of the well-poised head, covered with its rich brown-grey waving locks of hair,—the broad shoulders, the white firm muscular hands that worked the telegraphic instrument, and she was conscious of the impression of authority, order, knowledge and self-possession which seemed to have come into the little office with him, and to have created quite a new atmosphere. Outside, in the small garden, among mignonette and early flowering sweetpeas, Plato sat on his huge haunches in lion-like dignity, blinking at

the sun,—while Walden's terrier Nebbie, executed absurd but entirely friendly gambols in front of him, now pouncing down on two forepaws with nose to ground and eyes leering sideways,—now wagging an excited tail with excessive violence to demonstrate goodwill and a desire for amity,—and anon giving a short yelp of suppressed feeling,—to all of which conciliatory approaches Plato gave no other response than a vast yawn and meditative stare.

The monotonous click-click-click continued,—now stopping for a second, then going on more rapidly again, till Maryllia began to feel quite unreasonably impatient. She found something irritating at last in the contemplation of the back of Walden's cranium,—it was too well-shaped, she decided,—she could discover no fault in it. Humming a tune carelessly under her breath, she turned towards Mrs. Tapple's small grocery department, and feigned to be absorbed in an admiring survey of peppermint balls and toffee. Certain glistering squares of sticky white substance on a corner shelf commended themselves to her notice as specimens of stale 'nougât,' wherein the almonds represented a remote antiquity,—and a mass of stringy yellow matter laid out in lumps on blue paper and marked 'One Penny per ounce' claimed attention as a certain 'hardbake' peculiar to St. Rest, which was best eaten in a highly glutinous condition. A dozen or so of wrinkled apples which, to judge by their damaged and worn exteriors, must have been several autumns old, kept melancholy companionship with assorted packages of the 'Choice Tea' whereof the label was displayed in the window, and Maryllia was just about wondering whether she would, or could buy anything out of the musty-fusty collection, when the click-click-click stopped abruptly, and Walden stepped forth from the interior 'den' of the post-office.

"That's all right, Miss Vancourt," he said. "Your telegrams are sent correctly as far as Riversford anyhow, and there is one operator there who is acquainted with the French language. Whether they will transmit correctly from London I shouldn't like to say!—we are a singular nation, and one

of our singularities is that we scorn to know the language of our nearest neighbours!"

She smiled up at him,—and as his glance met hers he was taken aback, as it were, by the pellucid beauty and frank innocence of the grave dark-blue eyes that shone so serenely into his own.

"Thank you so very, very much! You have been most kind!" and with a swift droop of her white eyelids she veiled those seductive 'mirrors of the soul' beneath a concealing fringe of long golden-brown lashes—"It's quite a new experience to find a clergyman able and willing to be a telegraph clerk as well! So useful, isn't it?"

"In a village like this it is,"—rejoined Walden, gaily—"And after all, there's not much use in being a minister unless one can practically succeed in the art of 'ministering' to every sort of demand made upon one's capabilities! Even to Miss Vancourt's needs, should she require anything, from the preservation of trees to the sending of telegrams, that St. Rest can provide!"

Again Maryllia glanced at him, and again a little smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

"I must pay for the telegrams,"—she said abruptly—"Mrs. Tapple——"

"Yes, Miss—I've written it all down," murmured Mrs. Tapple nervously—"It's right, Mr. Walden, isn't it? If you would be so good as to look at it, bein' tuppence a word, it do make it different like, an' m'appen there might be a mistake——"

Walden glanced over the scrap of paper on which she had scrawled her rough figures.

"Fivepence out, I declare, Mrs. Tapple!" he said merrily, "Dear dear! Whatever is going to become of you, eh? To cheat yourself wouldn't matter—nobody minds *that*!—but to do the British Government out of fivepence would be a dreadful thing! Now if I had not seen this you would have been what is called 'short' this evening in making up accounts." Here he handed the corrected paper to Maryllia. "I think you will find that right."

Maryllia opened her purse and paid the amount,—and Mrs. Tapple, in giving her change for a sovereign, included among the coins a bright new threepenny piece with a hole in it. Spying this little bit of silver, Maryllia held it up in front of Walden's eyes triumphantly.

"Luck!" she exclaimed—"That's for you! It's a reward for your telegraphic operations! Will you be grateful if I give it to you?"

He laughed.

"Profoundly! It shall be my D. S. O.!"

"Then, there you are!" and she placed the tiny coin in the palm of the hand he held out to receive it. "The labourer is worthy of his hire! Now you can never go about like *some* clergymen, grumbling, and saying you work for no pay!" Her eyes sparkled mischievously. "What shall we do next? Oh, I know! Let's buy some acid drops!"

Mrs. Tapple stared and smiled.

"Or pear-drops," continued Maryllia, glancing critically at the various jars of 'sweeties,'—"I see the real old-fashioned pink ones up there,—lumpy at one end and tapering at the other. Do you like them? Or brandy balls? I think the pear-drops carry one back to the age of ten most quickly! But which do you prefer?"

Walden tried to look serious, but could not succeed. Laughter twinkled all over his face, and he began to feel extremely young.

"Well,—really, Miss Vancourt,—" he began.

"There, I know what you are going to say!" exclaimed Maryllia—"You are going to tell me that it would never do for a clergyman to be seen munching pear-drops in his own parish. *I* understand! But clergymen do ever so much worse than that sometimes. They do, really! Two ounces of pear-drops for me, Mrs. Tapple, please!—and one of brandy balls!"

Mrs. Tapple bustled out of her 'Gove'nment' office, and came to the grocery counter to dispense these dainties.

"They stick to the jar so,"—said Maryllia, watching her

thoughtfully; "They always did. I remember, as a child, seeing a man put his finger in to detach them. Don't put your finger in, Mrs. Tapple!—take a bit of wood—an old skewer or something. Oh, they're coming out all right! That's it!" And she popped one of the pear-drops into her mouth. "They are really very good—better than French *fondants*—so much more innocent and refreshing!" Here she took possession of the little paper-bags which Mrs. Tapple had filled with the sweets. "Thank you, Mrs. Tapple! If any answers to my telegrams come from Paris, please send them up to the Manor at once. Good-morning!"

"Good-morning, Miss!" And Mrs. Tapple, curtseying, pulled the door of her double establishment wider open to let the young lady pass out, which she did, with a smile and nod, Walden following her. Plato rose and paced majestically after his mistress, Nebbie trotting meekly at the rear, and so they all went forth from the postmistress's garden into the road, where Walden pausing, raised his hat in farewell.

"Oh, are you going?" queried Maryllia. "Won't you walk with me as far as your own rectory?"

"Certainly, if you wish it,"—he answered, with a slight touch of embarrassment; "I thought perhaps——"

"You thought perhaps,—what?" laughed Maryllia, glancing up at him archly—"That I was going to make you eat pear-drops against your will? Not I! I wouldn't be so rude! But I really thought I ought to buy something from Mrs. Tapple,—she was so worried, poor old dear!—till you came in. Then she looked as happy as though she saw a vision of angels. She's a perfect picture, with her funny old shawl and spectacles and knobbly red fingers—and do you know, all the time you were working the telegraph you were under the fragrant shadow of a big piece of bacon which was 'curing,'—positively 'curing' over your head! Couldn't you smell it?"

Walden's eyes twinkled.

"There was certainly a fine aroma in the air," he said—"But it seemed to me no more than the customary perfume common to Mrs. Tapple's surroundings. I daresay it was new

to you! A country clergyman is perhaps the only human being who has to inure himself to bacon odours as the prevailing sweetness of cottage interiors."

Maryllia laughed. She had a pretty laugh, silver-clear and joyous without loudness.

"Fancy your being so clever as to be able to send off telegrams!" she exclaimed—"What an accomplishment for a Churchman! Don't you want to know all about the messages you sent?—who the persons are, and what I have to do with them?"

"Not in the least!" answered John, smiling.

"Are you not of a curious disposition?"

"I never care about other people's business," he said, meeting her upturned eyes with friendly frankness—"I have enough to do to attend to my own."

"Then you are positively inhuman!" declared Maryllia—"And absolutely unnatural! You are, really! Every two-legged creature on earth wants to find out all the ins and outs of every other two-legged creature,—for if this were not the case wars would be at an end, and the wicked cease from troubling and the weary be at rest. So just because you don't want to know about my two friends in Paris, I'm going to tell you. Louis Gigue is the greatest teacher of singing there is,—and Cicely Bourne is his pupil, a perfectly wonderful little girl with a marvellous compass of voice, whose training and education I am paying for. I want her with me here—and I have sent for her;—Gigue can come on if he thinks it necessary to give her a few lessons during the summer, but of course she is not to sing in public till she is sixteen. She is only fourteen now."

Walden listened in silence. He was looking at his companion sideways, and noting the delicate ebb and flow of the rose tint in her cheeks, the bright flecks of gold in the otherwise brown hair, and the light poise of her dainty rounded figure as she stepped along beside him with an almost ærial grace and swiftness.

"She was the child of a Cornish labourer,"—went on

Maryllia. "Her mother sold her for ten pounds. Yes!—wasn't it dreadful?" This, as John's face expressed surprise. "But it is true! You shall hear all the story some day,—it is quite a little romance. And she is so clever!—you would think her ever so much older than she is, to hear her talk. Sometimes she is rather blunt, and people get offended with her—but she is true—oh, so true!—she wouldn't do a mean action for the world! She is just devoted to me,—and that is perhaps why I am devoted to her,—because after all, it's a great thing to be loved, isn't it?"

"It is indeed!" replied John, mechanically, beginning to feel a little dazed under the influence of the bright eyes, animated face, smiling lips and clear, sweet voice—"It ought to be the best of all things."

"It ought to be, and it is!" declared Maryllia emphatically; "Oh what a lovely bush of lilac!" And she hastened on a few steps in order to look more closely at the admired blossoms, which were swaying in the light breeze over the top of a thick green hedge—"Why, it must be growing in your garden! Yes, it is!—of course it is!—this is your gate. May I come in?"

She paused, her hand on the latch,—and for a moment Walden hesitated. A wave of colour swept up to his brows,—he was conscious of a struggling desire to refuse her request, united to a still more earnest craving to grant it. She looked at him, wistfully smiling.

"May I come in?" she repeated.

He advanced, and opened the gate, standing aside for her to pass.

"Of course you may!"—he said gently,—"And welcome!"

CHAPTER XIV

NOW it happened that Bainton was at that moment engaged in training some long branches of honeysuckle across the rectory walls, and being half-way up a ladder for the purpose, the surprise he experienced at seeing 'Passon' and Miss Vancourt enter the garden together and walk slowly side by side across the lawn, was so excessive, that in jerking his head round to convince himself that it was not a vision but a reality, he nearly lost his balance.

"Woa, steady!" he muttered, addressing the ladder which for a second swayed beneath him—"Woa, I sez! This ain't no billowy ocean with wot they calls an underground swell! So the ice 'ave broke, 'ave it! She, wot don't like clergymen, an' he, wot don't like ladies, 'as both come to saunterin' peaceful like with one another over the blessed green grass all on a fine May mornin'! Which it's gettin' nigh on June now an' no sign o' the weather losin' temper. Well, well! Wonders won't never cease it's true, but I'd as soon a' thought o' my old 'ooman dancin' a 'ornpipe among her cream cheeses as that Passon Walden would a' let Miss Vancourt inside this 'ere gate so easy like, an' he a bacheldor. But there!—arter all he's gettin' on in years, an' she's ever so much younger than he is, an' I dessay he's made up his mind to treat 'er kind like, as 'twere her father, which he should do, bein' spiritooal 'ead o' the village, an' as for the pretty face of 'er, he's not the man to look at it more'n once, an' then he couldn't tell you wot it's like. He favours his water-lilies more'n females,—ah! an' I bet he'd give ten pound for a new

specimen of a flower when he wouldn't lay out a 'apenny on a new specimen of a woman." Here, pausing in his reflections, he again looked cautiously round from his high vantage point of view on the ladder, and saw Walden break off a spray of white lilac from one bush of a very special kind near the edge of the lawn, and give it to Miss Vancourt. "Well, now that do beat me altogether!" he ejaculated under his breath; "If he's told me once, he's told me a 'undred times that he won't 'ave no blossoms broke off that bush on no account. An' there he is a-pickin' of it hisself! That's a kind of thing which do make me feel that men is a poor feeble-minded lot,—it do reely now!"

But feeble-minded or not, John had nevertheless gathered the choice flower, and moreover had found a certain pleasure in giving it to his fair companion, who inhaled its delicious odour with an appreciative smile.

"What a dear old house you have!" she said, glancing up at the crossed timbers, projecting gables, and quaint dormer windows set like eyes in the roof—"I had no idea that it was so pretty! And the garden is perfectly lovely. It is so very artistic!—it looks like a woman's dream of a garden rather than a man's."

John smiled.

"You think women more artistic than men?" he queried.

"In the decorative line—yes," she replied—"Especially where flowers are concerned. If one leaves the planning of a garden entirely to a man, he is sure to make it too stiff and mathematical,—he will not allow Nature to have her own way in the least little bit,—in fact"—and she laughed—"I don't think men as a rule like to let anything or anybody have their own way except themselves!"

The smile still lingered kindly round the corners of Walden's mouth.

"Possibly you may be right"—he said—"I almost believe you are. Men are selfish,—much more selfish than women. Nature made them so in the first instance,—and our methods of education and training all tend to intensify our natural

bent. But"—here he paused and looked at her thoughtfully; "I am not sure that absolute unselfishness would be a wise or strong trait in the character of a man. You see the first thing he has to do in this world is to earn the right to live,—and if he were always backing politely out of everybody else's way, and allowing himself to be hustled on one side in an unselfish desire to let others get to the front, he would scarcely be able to hold his own in any profession. And all those dependent upon his efforts would also suffer,—so that his 'unselfishness' might become the very worst kind of selfishness in the end—don't you think so?"

"Well—yes—perhaps in that way it might!" hesitated Maryllia, with a faint blush—"I ought not to judge anyone I know—but—oh dear!—the men one meets in town—the society men with their insufferable airs of conceit and condescension,—their dullness of intellect,—their preference for cigars, whiskey and Bridge to anything else under the sun,—their intensely absorbed love of personal ease, and their perfectly absurd confidence in their own supreme wisdom!—these are the hybrid creatures that make one doubt the worth of the rest of their sex altogether."

"But there are hybrid creatures on both sides,"—said Walden quietly—"Just as there are the men you speak of, so there are women of the same useless and insufferable character. Is it not so?"

She looked up at him and laughed.

"Why yes, of course!" she frankly admitted—"I guess I won't argue with you on the six of one and half-dozen of the other! But it's just as natural for women to criticise men as for men to criticise women nowadays. Long ago, in the lovely 'once upon a time' fairy period, the habit of criticism doesn't appear to have developed strongly in either sex. The men were chivalrous and tender,—the women adoring and devoted—I think it must have been perfectly charming to have lived then! It is all so different now!"

"Fortunately, it is!" said John, with a mirthful sparkle in his eyes—"I am sure you would not have liked that 'once

upon a time fairy period' as you call it, at all, Miss Vancourt! Poets and romancists may tell us that the men were 'chivalrous and tender,' but plain fact convinces us that they were very rough unwashen tyrants who used to shut up their ladies in gloomy castles where very little light and air could penetrate,—and the adoring and devoted ladies, in their turn, made very short work of the whole business by either dying of their own grief and ill-treatment, or else getting killed in cold blood by order of their lords and masters. Why, one of the finest proofs of an improvement in our civilisation is the freedom of thought and action given to women in the present day. Personally speaking, I admit to a great fondness for old-fashioned ways, and particularly for old-fashioned manners,—but I cannot shut my mind to the fact that for centuries women have been unfairly hindered by men in every possible way from all chance of developing the great powers of intelligence they possess,—and it is certainly time the opposition to their advancement should cease. Of course, being a man myself,"—and he smiled—"I daresay that in my heart of hearts I like the type of woman I first learned to know and love best,—my mother. She had the early Victorian ways,—they were very simple, but also very sweet."

He broke off, and for a moment or two they paced the lawn in silence.

"I suppose you live all alone here?" asked Maryllia, suddenly.

"Yes. Quite alone."

"And are you happy?"

"I am content."

"I understand!" and she looked at him somewhat earnestly; "'Happy' is a word that should seldom be used I think. It is only at the rarest possible moments that one can feel real true happiness."

"You are too young to say that,"—he rejoined gently—"All your life is before you. The greater part of mine lies behind me."

Again she glanced at him somewhat timidly.

"Mr. Walden"—she began—"I'm afraid—I suppose—I daresay you think——"

John caught the appealing flash of the blue eyes, and wondered what she was going to say. She played with the spray of lilac he had given her, and for a moment seemed to have lost her self-possession.

"I am quite sure,"—she went on, hurriedly—"that you—I mean, I'm afraid you haven't a very good opinion of me because I don't go to church—"

He looked at her, smiling a little.

"Don't you go to church?" he asked—"I didn't know it!"

Here was a surprise for the Lady of the Manor. The clergyman of her own parish,—a man, who by all accepted rule and precedent ought to have been after her at once, asking for subscriptions to this fund and that fund, toadying her for her position, and begging for her name and support, had not even noticed her absence from divine service on Sundays! She did not know whether to be relieved or dissatisfied. Such indifference to her actions piqued her feminine pride, and yet, his tone was very kind and courteous. Noting the colour coming and going on her face, he spoke again—

"I never interfere personally with my parishioners, Miss Vancourt"—he said—"To attend church or stay away from church is a matter of conscience with each individual, and must be left to individual choice. I should be the last person in the world to entertain a bad opinion of anyone simply because he or she never went to church. That would be foolish indeed! Some of the noblest and best men in Christendom to-day never go to church,—but they are none the less noble and good. They have their reasons of conscience for non-committing themselves to accepted forms of faith, and it often turns out that they are more truly Christian and more purely religious than the most constant church-goer that ever lived."

Maryllia gave a little sigh of sudden relief.

"Ah, you are a broad-minded Churchman!" she said. "I

am glad! Very glad! Because you have no doubt followed the trend of modern thought,—and you must have read all the discussions in the magazines and in the books that are written on such subjects, — and you can understand how difficult it is to a person like myself to decide what is right when so many of the wisest and most educated men agree to differ."

Walden stopped abruptly in his walk.

"Please do not mistake me, Miss Vancourt," he said gravely, and with emphasis — "I should be sorry if you gathered a wrong opinion of me at the outset of our acquaintance. As your minister I feel that I ought to make my position clear to you. You say that I have probably followed the trend of modern thought—and I presume that you mean the trend of modern thought in religious matters. Now I have not 'followed' it, but I have patiently studied it, and find it in all respects deplorable and disastrous. At the same time I would not force the high truths of religion on any person, nor would I step out of my way to ask anyone to attend church if he or she did not feel inclined to do so. And why? Because I fully admit the laxity and coldness of the Church in the present day—and I know that there are many ministers of the Gospel who do not attract so much as they repel. I am not so self-opinionated as to dream that I, a mere country parson, can succeed in drawing souls to Christ when so many men of my order, more gifted than I, have failed, and continue to fail. But I wish you quite frankly to understand that the trend of modern thought does not affect the vows I took at my ordination,—that I do not preach one thing, and think another, — and that whatever my faults and shortcomings may be, I most earnestly endeavour to impress the minds of all those men and women who are committed to my care with the beauty, truth and saving grace of the Christian Faith."

Maryllia was silent. She appeared to be looking at the daisies in the grass.

"I hope," he continued quietly, "you will forgive this rather serious talk of mine. But when you spoke of 'the trend of modern thought,' it seemed necessary to me to let you know

at once and straightly that I am not with it,—that I do not belong to the modern school. Professing to be a Christian minister, I try to be one,—very poorly and unsuccessfully I know,—but still, I try!"

Maryllia raised her eyes. There was a glisten on her long lashes as of tears.

"Please forgive *me*!" she said simply—"And thank you for speaking as you have done! I shall always remember it, and honour you for it. I hope we shall be friends?"

She put the words as a query, and half timidly held out her little ungloved hand. He took it at once and pressed it cordially.

"Indeed, I am sure we shall!" he said heartily, and the smile that made his face more than ordinarily handsome lit up his eyes and showed a depth of sincerity and kindly feeling reflected straight from his honest soul. A sudden blush swept over Maryllia's cheeks, and she gently withdrew her hand from his clasp. A silence fell between them, and when they broke the spell it was by a casual comment respecting the wealth of apple-blossoms that were making the trees around them white with their floral snow.

"St. Rest is a veritable orchard, when the season favours it," said Walden—"It is one of the best fruit-growing corners in England. At Abbot's Manor, for instance, the cherry crop is finer than can be gathered on the same acreage of ground in Kent. Did you know that?"

Maryllia laughed.

"No! I know absolutely nothing about my own home, Mr. Walden,—and I am perfectly aware that I ought to be ashamed of my ignorance. I *am* ashamed of it! I'm going to try and amend the error of my ways as fast as I can. When Cicely Bourne comes to stay with me, she will help me. She's ever so much more sensible than I am. She's a genius."

"Geniuses do not always get the credit of being sensible, do they?" queried John, smiling—"Are they not supposed to be creatures of impulse, dwellers in the air, and wholly irresponsible?"

"Exactly so,"—she replied—"That is the commonplace opinion commonplace people entertain of them. Yet the commonplace people owe everything they enjoy in art, literature and science to the conceptions of genius, and of genius alone. As for Cicely, she is the most practical little person possible. She began to earn her living at the age of eleven, and has 'roughed' it in the world more severely than many a man. But she keeps her dreams."

"And those who wish her well will pray that she may always keep them,"—said Walden—"For to lose one's illusions is to lose the world."

"The world itself may be an illusion!" said Maryllia, drawing near the garden gate and leaning upon it for a moment, as she glanced up at him with a vague sadness in her eyes,—"We never know. I have often felt that it is only a pretty little pageant, with a very dark background behind it!"

He was silent, looking at her. For the first time he caught himself noticing her dress. It was of simple pale blue linen, relieved with white embroidered lawn, and in its cool, fresh, clean appearance was in keeping with the clear bright day. A plain straw garden hat tied across the crown and under the chin with a strip of soft blue ribbon to match the linen gown, was the finish to this 'fashionable' young woman's toilette,—and though it was infinitely becoming to the fair skin, azure eyes, and gold-brown hair of its wearer, it did not suggest undue extravagance, or a Paris 'mode.' And while he yet almost unconsciously studied the picture she made, resting one arm lightly across his garden gate, she lifted the latch suddenly and swung it open.

"Good-bye!" and she nodded smilingly—"Thank you so much for letting me see your lovely garden! As soon as Cicely arrives, you must come and see her—you will, won't you?"

"I shall be most happy——" he murmured.

"She will be so interested to hear how you sent her my telegram,"—continued Maryllia—"And Gigue too—poor old Gigue!—he is sure to come over here some time during the

summer. He is such a quaint person! I think you will like him! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye—for the present!" said John with a slight note of appeal in his voice, which was not lost wholly upon the air alone, for Maryllia turned her head back towards him with a laugh.

"Oh, of course!—only for the present! We are really next-door neighbours, and I'm afraid we can't escape each other unless we each play hermit in separate caves! But I promise not to bore you with my presence very often!"

She waved the spray of white lilac he had given her in farewell, and calling her dog to her side, passed down the village road lightly, like a blue flower drifting with the May breeze, and was soon out of sight.

Walden closed the gate after her with careful slowness, and returned across the lawn to his favourite seat under his favourite apple-tree. Nebbie followed him, disconsolately snuffing the ground in the trail of the departed Plato, who doubtless, to the smaller animal's mind, represented a sort of canine monarch who ruthlessly disdained the well-meaning attentions of his inferiors. Bainton, having finished his task of training the vines across the walls of the rectory, descended his ladder, making as much noise as he could about it and adding thereto a sudden troublesome cough which would he considered, probably excite his master's sympathy and instant attention. But Walden paid no heed. He was apparently busy fumbling with his watch-chain. Bainton waited a moment, and then, unable any longer to control his curiosity, seized his ladder and deliberately carried it across the lawn, though he knew that that was not the proper way to the tool-shed where it was kept. Halting close to the seat under the apple-tree, he said:—

"Yon red honeysuckle's comin' on fine, Passon,—it be as full o' bud as a pod o' peas."

"Ay indeed!" murmured Walden, absently—"That's all right!"

Bainton paused expectantly. No further word however was

vouchsafed to him, and he knew by experience that such silence implied his master's wish to be left alone. With an almost magisterial gravity he surveyed the Reverend John's bent head, and with another scrutinising glance, ascertained the nature of the occupation on which his fingers were engaged, whereupon his face expressed the liveliest amazement. Shouldering his ladder, he went his way,—and once out of earshot gave vent to a long low whistle.

"It do beat me!" he said, slapping one corduroy-trousered leg vehemently—"It do beat me altogether—it do reely now! I ain't no swearin' sort, an' bad langwidge ain't my failin', but I feel like takin' a bet, or sayin' a swear when I sees a sensible man like, makin' a fool of hisself! If Passon ain't gone looney all on a suddint, blest if I knows wot's come to 'im. 'Tain't Miss Vancourt,—'tain't no one nor nothink wot I knows on, but I'm blowed if he worn't sittin' under that tree, like a great gaby, a' fastenin' a mis'able threepenny bit to 'is watch-chain! Did anyone ever 'ear the like! A threepenny bit with a 'ole in it! To think of a man like that turnin' to the sup'stitions o' maids an' wearin' a 'oley bit o' silver! It do make me wild!—it do reely now!"

And snorting with ineffable disdain, Bainton almost threw his ladder into the tool-shed, thereby scaring a couple of doves who had found their way within, and who now flew out with a whirr of white wings that glistened like pearl in the sunlight as they spread upwards and away into the sky.

"A threepenny bit with a 'ole in it!" he repeated, mechanically watching the birds of peace in their flight—"An' on his watch-chain too, along wi' the gold cross wot he allus wears there, an' which folks sez was the last thing wore by 'is dead sister! Somethin's gone wrong with 'im—somethin' *must* a' gone wrong! Ginerally speakin' a 'oley bit means a woman in it—but 'tain't that way wi' Passon for sure—there's a deeper 'ole than the 'ole in the threepenny—a 'ole wot ain't got no bottom to it, so fur as I can see. I'm just fair 'mazed with that 'ole!—'mazed an' moithered altogether, blest if I ain't!"

The Reverend John, meanwhile, seated under his canopy

of apple-blossoms, had succeeded in attaching the "'oley bit' to his chain in such a manner that it should not come unduly into notice with the mere action of pulling out his watch. He could not, for the life of him, have explained, had he been asked, the reason why he had determined to thus privately wear it on his own person. To himself he said he 'fancied' it. And why should not parsons have 'fancies' like other people? Why should they not wear "'oley bits' if they liked? No objection, either moral, legal or religious could surely be raised to such a course of procedure!

And John actually whistled a tune as he slipped back his chain with its new adornment attached, into his waistcoat pocket, and surveyed his garden surroundings with a placid smile. His interview with Miss Vancourt had not been an unpleasant experience by any means. He liked her better than when he had first seen her on the morning of their meeting under the boughs of the threatened 'Five Sister' beeches. He could now, as he thought, gauge her character and temperament correctly, with all the wonderful perspicuity and not-to-be-contradicted logic of a man. She was charming,—and she knew her charm;—she was graceful, and she was aware of her grace; —she was bright and intelligent in the prettily 'surface' way of women,—she evidently possessed a kind heart, and she seemed thoughtful of other people's feelings,—she had a sweet voice and a delightfully musical laugh,—and—and—that was about all. It was not much, strictly speaking;—yet he found himself considerably interested in weighing the pros and cons of her nature, and wondering how she had managed to retain, in the worldly and social surroundings to which she had been so long accustomed, the child-like impulsiveness of her manner, and the simple frankness of her speech.

"Of course it may be all put on,"—he reflected, though with a touch of shamed compunction at the bare suggestion—"One can never tell! It seemed natural. And it would hardly be worth her while to act a part for the benefit of an old fogey like myself. I think she is genuine. I hope so! At any rate I will believe she is, till she proves herself otherwise. Of

course 'the trend of modern thought' has touched her. The cruellest among the countless cruel deeds of latter-day atheism is to murder the Christ in women. For, as woman's purity first brought the Divine Master into the world, so must woman's purity still keep Him here with us,—else we men are lost—lost through the sins, not only of our fathers, but chiefly of our mothers!"

That same evening Maryllia received a prompt reply to one of the telegrams which Walden had sent off for her in the morning. It was brief and to the point, and only ran:— 'Coming. Cicely';—a message which Mrs. Tapple had no difficulty in deciphering, and which she sent up to the Manor, post haste, as soon as it arrived. The telegraph-boy who conveyed it, got sixpence for himself as a reward for the extra speed he had put on in running all the way from the village to the house, thereby outstripping the postman, who being rotund in figure was somewhat heavily labouring up in the same direction with the last delivery of letters for the day. Miss Vancourt's correspondents were generally very numerous,—but on this occasion there was only one letter for her,—one, neatly addressed, with a small finely engraved crest on the flap of the envelope. Maryllia surveyed that envelope and crest with disfavour,—she had seen too many of the same kind. The smile that brightened her face when she read Cicely's telegram, faded altogether into an expression of cold weariness as with a small silver paper-knife she slowly slit the closed edges of the unwelcome missive and glanced indifferently at its contents. It ran as follows:

"MY DEAR MISS MARYLLIA,—I feel sure you do not realise the great pain you are inflicting on your aunt, as well as on myself, by declining to answer our letters except by telegram. Pray remember that we are quite in the dark as to the state of your health, your surroundings and your general well-being. Your sudden departure from town was, if you will permit me to say so, a most unwise impulse, causing as it has done, the greatest perplexity in your own social circle and

among your hosts of friends. I have done my best to smooth matters over, by assuring all enquirers that certain matters on your country estate required your personal supervision, but rumour, as you know, has many tongues which are not likely to be easily silenced. Your aunt was much surprised and disturbed to receive from you a box of peacocks' feathers, without any word from yourself. She has no doubt you meant the gift kindly, but was not the manner of giving somewhat strange?—let me say eccentric? I hope you will allow me to point out to you that nothing is more fatal to a woman in good society than to attain any sort of reputation for eccentricity. I may take the liberty of saying this to you as an old friend, and as one who still holds persistently to the dear expectation, despite much discouragement, of being able soon to call you by a closer name than mere friendship allows. The disagreement between your aunt and yourself should surely be a matter of slight duration, and not sufficient in any case to warrant your rash decision to altogether resign the protection and kindly guardianship which she, on her part, has exercised over you for so many years. I cannot too strongly impress upon your mind the fatal effect any long absence from her is likely to have on your position in society, and though as yet you have only been about three weeks away, people are talking and will no doubt continue to talk. If you find your old home an agreeable change from town life, pray allow your aunt to join you there. She will do so, I am sure, with pleasure. She misses you very greatly, and I will never believe that you would wilfully cause her needless trouble. I may not, I know, express my own feelings on the subject, as I should probably only incur your scorn or displeasure, but simply as an honest man who wishes you nothing but good, I ask you quietly to consider to what misrepresentation and calumny you voluntarily expose yourself by running away, as it were, from a rightful and affectionate protector and second mother like your good aunt, and living all alone in the country without any one of your immediate circle of friends within calling distance. Is there a more compromising or more

ludicrous position than that of the independent and defenceless female? I think not. She is the laughing-stock of the clubs, and the perennial joke of the comic press. Pray do not place yourself in the same category with the despised and unlovely of your sex, but remain on the height where Nature placed you, and where your charm and intelligence can best secure acknowledgment from the less gifted and fortunate. Entreating your pardon for any word or phrase in this letter which may unluckily chance to annoy you, I am, my dear Miss Maryllia,—Yours with the utmost devotion,

"ROXMOUTH."

"What a humbug he is!" said Maryllia, half aloud, as she put the letter back in its envelope and set it aside—"What a soft, smooth, civil, correctly trained humbug! How completely he ignores the possibility of my having any intelligence, even while he asks me to remain 'on the height' where it can best secure acknowledgment! He never appears to realise that my intelligence may be of such a quality as to enable me to see through him pretty clearly! And so the 'independent and defenceless female' is the laughing-stock of the clubs, is she? Well, I daresay he is quite right there! There's nothing braver for men to do at their clubs than to laugh at the 'defenceless' women who would rather fight the world alone and earn their own livelihood, than enter into loveless marriages! The quaintest part of the letter is the bit about Aunt Emily. Roxmouth must really think me a perfect idiot if he dreams that I would accept such a story as that she was 'surprised and disturbed' at receiving the box of peacocks' feathers. Aunt Emily was never 'surprised' or 'disturbed' at anything in her life, I am sure! When poor Uncle Fred died, she pressed her handkerchief to her eyes for five minutes, and then sat down at her desk to write her orders for mourning. And when I spoke my mind to her about Roxmouth, she only smiled and told me not to excite myself. Then when I said I had determined to leave her altogether and go back to my own home to live, she took it quite easily,

and merely stated she would have to alter her will. I assured her I hoped she would do so at once, as I had no wish to benefit by her death. Then she didn't speak to me for several days, and I came away quietly without bidding her good-bye. And here I am,—and here I mean to stay!"

She laughed a little, and moving to the open window, looked out on the quiet beauty of the landscape. "Yes!—I too will become a laughing-stock of the clubs;—and even *I* may attain the distinction of being accepted as a 'joke by the comic press'! I will be an 'independent and defenceless female,' and see how I get on! In any case I'd rather be defenceless than have Roxmouth as a defender. And I shall not be alone here, now that Cicely is coming. Besides, I have two men friends in the village,—at least, I think I have! I'm sure of one,—old Josey Letherbarrow!" The smile lingered on her lips, as she still looked out on the lawn and terrace, shadowed by the evening dusk, and sweet with the cool perfume of the rising dew. "And the other,—if he should turn out as agreeable as he seemed this morning,—why, he is a tower of strength so far as respectability is concerned! What better protection can an 'independent and defenceless female' have than the minister of the parish? I can go to him for a character, ask him for a reference, throw myself and my troubles upon him as upon a rock, and make him answer for me as an honest and well-intentioned parishioner! And I believe he would 'speak up' for me, as the poor folks say,—yes, my Lord Roxmouth!—I believe he would,—and if he did, I'm certain he would speak straight, and not whisper a few small poisonous lies round the corner! For I think"—and here the train of her reflections wandered away from her aunt and her lordly wooer altogether, "yes,—I think Mr. Walden is a good man! I was not quite sure about him when I first met him,—I thought his eyes seemed deceitful,—so many parsons' eyes are!—but I looked well into them to-day,—and they're not the usual eyes of a parson at all,—they're just the eyes of a British sailor who has watched rough seas all his life, —and such eyes are always true!"

CHAPTER XV

ON the following Monday afternoon Cicely Bourne, to whom Walden had so successfully telegraphed Maryllia's commands, arrived. She was rather an odd-looking young person. Her long thin legs were much too long for the shortness of her black cashmere frock, which was made 'en demoiselle,' after the fashion adhered to in French convents, where girls are compelled to look as ugly as possible, in order that they may eschew the sin of personal vanity,—her hair, of a rich raven black, was plaited in a stiff thick braid resembling a Chinese pigtail, and was fastened at the end with a bow of ribbon,—and a pair of wonderfully brilliant dark eyes flashed under her arching brows, suggesting something weird and witchlike in their roving glances, and giving an almost uncanny expression to her small, sallow face. But she was full of the most exuberant vitality,—she sparkled all over with it and seemed to exhale it in the mere act of breathing. Brimful of delight at the prospect of spending the whole summer with her friend and patroness, to whom she owed everything, and whom she adored with passionate admiration and gratitude, she dashed into the old-world silence and solitude of Abbot's Manor like a wild wave of the sea, crested with sunshine and bubbling over with ripples of mirth. Her incessant chatter and laughter awoke the long-hushed echoes of the ancient house to responsive gaiety,—and every pale lingering shadow of dullness or loneliness fled away from the exhilarating effect of her presence, which acted at once as a stimulant and charm to Maryllia, who welcomed her arrival with affectionate enthusiasm.

"But oh, my dear!" she exclaimed—"What a little school-guy they have made of you! You must have grown taller, surely, since November when I saw you last? Your frock is ever so much too short!"

"I don't think I've grown a bit,"—said Cicely, glancing down at her own legs disparagingly—"But my frock wore shabby at the bottom, and the nuns had a fresh hem turned up all round. That reduced its length by a couple of inches at least. I told them as modestly as I could that my ankles were too vastily exposed, but they said it didn't matter, as I was only a day-boarder."

Maryllia's eyebrows went up perplexedly.

"I don't see what that has to do with it,"—she said—"Would you have preferred to live in the Convent altogether, dear?"

"Grand merci!" and Cicely made an expressive grimace—"Not I! I should not have had half as many lessons from Gigue, and I should never have been able to write to you without the Mère Supérieure spying into my letters. That's why none of the girls are allowed to have sealing-wax, because all their letters are ungummed over a basin of hot water and read before going to post. Discipline, discipline! Torquemada's Inquisition was nothing to it! Of course I had to tell the Mère Supérieure that you had sent for me, and that I should be away all summer. She asked heaps of questions, but she got nothing out of me, so of course she wrote to your aunt. But that doesn't matter, does it?"

"Not in the least,"—answered Maryllia, decisively,—"My aunt has nothing whatever to do with me now, nor I with her. I am my own mistress."

"And it becomes you amazingly!" declared Cicely—"I never saw you looking prettier! You are just the sweetest thing that ever fell out of heaven in human shape! Oh, Maryllia, what a lovely, lovely place this is! And is it all yours?—your very, very own?"

"My very, very own!" and Maryllia, in replying to the question, felt a thrill of legitimate pride in the beautiful old

Tudor house of her ancestors,—"I wish I had never been taken away from it! The more I see of it, the more I feel I ought not to have left it so long."

"It is real home, sweet home!" said Cicely, and her great eyes grew suddenly sad and wistful, as she slipped a caressing arm round her friend's waist—"How grateful I am to you for asking me to come and stay in it! Because, after all, I am only a poor little peasant,—with a musical faculty!"

Maryllia kissed her affectionately.

"You are a genius, my dear!" she said—"There is no higher supremacy. What does Gigue say of you now?"

"Gigue is satisfied, I think. But I don't really know. He says I'm too precocious—that my voice is a woman's before I'm a girl. It's abnormal—and I'm abnormal too. I know I am,—and I know it's horrid—but I can't help it! Where's the piano?"

"There isn't one in the house," said Maryllia, smiling; "Abbot's Manor has always lived about a hundred and fifty years behind the times. But I've sent for a boudoir grand—it will be here this week. Meanwhile, won't this do?" and she pointed to a quaint little instrument occupying a recess near the window—"It's a spinet of Charles the Second's period——"

"Delightful!" cried Cicely, ecstatically—"There's nothing sweeter in the whole world to sing to!"

Opening the painted lid with the greatest tenderness and care, she passed her hands lightly over the spinet's worn and yellow ivory keys and evoked a faint fairy-like tinkling.

"Listen! Isn't it like the wandering voice of some little ghost of the past trying to speak to us?" she said—"And in such sweet tune, too! Poor little ghost! Shall I sing to you? Shall I tell you that we have a sympathy in common with you, even though you are so old and so far, far away!"

Her lips parted, and a pure note, crystal clear, and of such silvery softness as to seem more supernatural than human, floated upward on the silence. Maryllia caught her breath, and listened with a quickly beating heart,—she knew that the

voice of this child whom she had rescued from a life of misery, was a world's marvel.

> "Le douce printemps fait naître,—
> Autant d'amours que de fleurs;
> Tremblez, tremblez, jeunes cœurs!
> Dès qu'il commence à paraître
> Il faut cesser les froideurs."

Here with a sudden brilliant *roulade* the singer ran up the scale to the C in alt, and there paused with a trill as delicious and full as the warble of a nightingale.

> "Mais ce qu'il a de douceurs
> Vous coûtera cher peut-être!
> Tremblez, tremblez, jeunes cœurs,
> Le douce printemps fait naître,
> Autant d'amours que de fleurs!"

She ceased. The air, broken into delicate vibrations, carried the lovely sounds rhythmically outward, onward and into unechoing distance.

She turned and looked at Maryllia—then smiled.

"I see you are pleased,"—she said.

"Pleased! Cicely, I don't believe anyone was ever born into the world to sing as you sing!"

Cicely looked quaintly meditative.

"Well, I don't know about that! You see there have been several millions of folks born into the world, and there may have been just *one* naturally created singer among them!" She laughed, and touched a chord on the spinet. "The old French song exactly suits this old French instrument. I see it is an ancient thing of Paris. Gigue says I have improved—but he will never admit much, as you know. He has forbidden me to touch the C in alt, and I did it just now. I cannot help it sometimes—it comes so easy. But you must scold me, Maryllia darling, when you hear me taking it,—I don't want to strain the vocal cords, and I always forget I'm only fourteen; I feel—oh! ever so

much older!—ages old, in fact!" She sighed, and stretched her arms up above her head. "What a perfect room this is to sing in! What a perfect house!—and what a perfect angel you are to have me with you!"

Her eyes filled with sudden tears of emotion, but she quickly blinked them away.

"Et ce cher Roxmouth?" she queried, suddenly, glancing appreciatively at the rippling gold-brown lights and shades of her friend's hair, the delicate hues of her complexion, and the grace of her form—"Has he been to see you in this idyllic retreat?"

Maryllia gave a slight gesture of wearied impatience.

"Certainly not! How can you ask such a question, Cicely! I left my aunt on purpose to get rid of him once and for all. And he knows it;—yet he has written to me every two days regularly since I came here!"

"Hélas!—ce cher Roxmouth!" murmured Cicely, with a languid gesture imitative of the 'society manner' of Mrs. Fred Vancourt,—"Parfait gentilhomme au bout des ongles!"

Maryllia laughed.

"Yes,—Aunt Emily all over!" she said—"How tired I am of that phrase! She knows as well as anybody that Roxmouth, for all his airs of aristocratic propriety, is a social villain of the lowest type of modern *decadence*, yet she would rather see me married to him than to any other man she has ever met. And why? Simply because he will be a Duke! She would like to say to all her acquaintances—'My niece is a Duchess.' She would feel a certain fantastic satisfaction in thinking that her millions were being used to build up the decayed fortunes of an English nobleman's family, as well as to 'restore' Roxmouth Castle, which is in a bad state of repair. And she would sacrifice my heart and soul and life to such trumpery ambitions as these!"

"Trumpery ambitions!" echoed Cicely—"My dear, they are ambitions for which nearly all women are willing to scramble, fight and die! To be a Duchess! To dwell in an ancient 'restored' castle of once proud English nobles! Saint Moses! Who wouldn't sacrifice such vague matters as heart,

life and soul for the glory of being called 'Your Grace' by obsequious footmen! My unconventional Maryllia! You are setting yourself in rank, heretical opposition to the conventionalities of society, and won't all the little conventional minds hate you for it!"

"It doesn't matter if they do," rejoined Maryllia—"I have never been loved since my father's death,—so I don't mind being hated."

"*I* love you!" said Cicely, with swift ardour—"Don't say you have never been loved!"

Maryllia caught her hand tenderly and kissed it.

"I was not thinking of you, dear!" she said—"Forgive me! I was thinking of men. They have admired me and flirted with me,—many of them have wanted to marry me, in order to get hold of Aunt Emily's fortune with me,—but none of them have ever loved me. Cicely, Cicely, I want to be loved!"

"So do I!" said Cicely, with answering light in her eyes—"But I don't see how it's going to be done in my case! You may possibly get your wish, but I!—why, my dear, I see myself *in futuro* as a 'prima donna assoluta' perhaps, with several painted and padded *bassi* and *tenori* making sham love to me in opera till I get perfectly sick of *cuore* and *amore*, and cry out for something else by way of a change! I am quite positive that love,—love such as we read of in poetry and romance, doesn't really exist! And I have another fixed opinion—which is, that the people who write most about it have never felt it. One always expresses best, even in a song, the emotions one has never experienced."

Maryllia looked at her in a little wonder.

"Do you really think that?"

"I do! It's not one of Gigue's sayings, though I know I often echo Gigue!"

She went to the window. "How lovely the garden is! Come out on the lawn, Maryllia, and let us talk!" And as they sauntered across the grass together with arms round each other's waists, she chattered on—"People who write books

and music are generally lonely,—and they write best about love because they need it. They fancy it must be much better than it is. But, after all, the grandest things go unloved. Look at the sky, how clear it is and pure. Is it loved by any other sky that we know of? And the sun up there, all alone in its splendour,—I wonder if any other sun loves it? There are so many lonely things in the universe! And it seems to me that the loneliest are always the loveliest and grandest. It is only stupid ephemera that are gregarious. Worms crawl along in masses,—mites swarm in a cheese—flies stick in crowds on jam—and brainless people shut themselves up all together within the walls of a city. I'd rather be an eagle than a sparrow,—a star than one of a thousand bonfire sparks,—and as a mere woman, I would rather ten thousand times live a solitary life by myself till I die, than be married to a rascal or a fool!"

"Exactly my sentiments,"—said Maryllia—"Only you put them more poetically than I can. Do you know, Cicely, you talk very oddly sometimes?—very much in advance of your age, I mean?"

"Do I?" And Cicely's tone expressed a mingling of surprise and penitence—"I didn't know it. But I suppose I really can't help it, Maryllia! I was a very miserable child—and miserable children age rapidly. Perhaps I shall get younger as I grow older! You must remember that at eleven years old I was scrubbing floors like any charwoman in the Convent for two centimes an hour. I gained a lot of worldly wisdom that way by listening to the talk of the nuns, which is quite as spiteful and scandalous as anything one hears in outside 'wicked' society. Then I got into the Quartier Latin set with Gigue, who picked me up because he heard me singing in the street,—and altogether my experiences of life haven't been toys and bonbons. I know I *think* 'old'—and I'm sure I feel old!"

"Not when you play or sing," suggested Maryllia.

"No—not then—never then! Then, all the youth of the world seems to rush into me,—it tingles in my fingers, and

throbs in my throat I feel as if I could reach heaven with sound!—yes! I feel that I could sing to God Himself, if He would only listen!"

Her eyes glowed with passion,—the plainness of her features was transformed into momentary beauty. Maryllia was silent. She knew that the aspirations of genius pent up in this elf-like girl were almost too strong for her, and that the very excitability and sensitiveness of her nature were such as to need the greatest care and tenderness in training and controlling. Tactfully she changed the conversation to ordinary subjects, and in a little while Cicely had learned all that Maryllia herself knew about the village of St. Rest and its inhabitants. She was considerably interested in the story of the rescue of the 'Five Sister' beeches, and asked with a touch of anxiety, what had become of the dismissed agent, Oliver Leach?

"Oh, he is still in the neighbourhood,"—said Maryllia, indifferently—"He works for Sir Morton Pippitt, and I believe has found a home at Badsworth. His accounts are not yet all handed in to my solicitors. But I have a new agent now,—a Mr. Stanways—he is just married to quite a nice young woman,—and he has already begun work. Mr. Stanways has splendid recommendations—so that will be all right."

"No doubt—so far as Mr. Stanways himself is concerned it will be all right,"—rejoined Cicely, musingly—"But if, as you say, the man Oliver Leach cursed you, it isn't pleasant to think he is hanging around here."

"He isn't hanging round anywhere,"—declared Maryllia, easily—"He is out of this beat altogether. He cursed me certainly,—but he was in a temper,—and I should say that curses come naturally to him. But, as the clergyman was present at the time, the curse couldn't take any effect." She laughed. "You know Satan always runs away from the Church."

"Who is the clergyman, and what is he like?" asked Cicely.

"He's not at all disagreeable"—answered Maryllia, carelessly—"Rather stiff perhaps and old-fashioned,—but he seems to be a great favourite with all his parishioners. His name is John Walden. He has restored the church here, quite at his own expense, and according to the early original design. It is really quite wonderful. When I was a child here, I only remember it as a ruin, but now people come from far and near to see it. It will please you immensely."

"But you don't go to it," observed Cicely, suggestively.

"No. I haven't attended a service there as yet. But I don't say I never will attend one. That will depend on circumstances."

"I remember you always hated parsons," said Cicely, thoughtfully.

Maryllia laughed.

"Yes, I always did!"

"And you always will, I suppose?"

"Well, I expect I shall have to tolerate Mr. Walden,"—Maryllia answered lightly,—"Because he's really my nearest neighbour. But he's not so bad as most of his class."

"I daresay he's a better type of man than Lord Roxmouth," said Cicely. "By the way, Maryllia, that highly distinguished nobleman has spread about a report that you are 'peculiar,' simply because you won't marry him? The very nuns at the Convent have heard this, and it does make me so angry! For when people get hold of the word 'peculiar,' it is made to mean several things."

"I know!" and for a moment Maryllia's fair brows clouded with a shadow of perplexity and annoyance—"It is a word that may pass for madness, badness, or any form of social undesirability. But I don't mind! I'm quite aware that Roxmouth, if he cannot marry me, will slander me. It's a way some modern men have of covering their own rejection and defeat. The woman in question is branded through the 'smart set' as 'peculiar,' 'difficult,' 'impossible to deal with'—oh yes!—I know it all! But I'm prepared for it—and just to forestall Roxmouth a little, I'm going to have a few

people down here by way of witnesses to my 'peculiar' mode of life. Then they can go back to London and talk."

"They can, and they will,—you may be sure of that!" said Cicely, satirically—"Is this a 'dressed' county, Maryllia?"

Maryllia gave vent to a peal of laughter.

"I should say not,—but I really don't know!" she replied, "People have called on me, but I have not, as yet, returned their calls. We'll do that in this coming week. The only person I have seen, who poses as a 'county' lady, is an elderly spinster named Tabitha Pippitt, only daughter of Sir Morton Pippitt, who is a colonial manufacturer, and, therefore, not actually in the 'county' at all. Miss Tabitha was certainly not 'dressed,' she was merely covered."

"That's the very height of propriety!" declared Cicely—"For, after all, covering alone is necessary. 'Dress,' in the full sense of the word, implies vanity and all its attendant sins. Gigue says you can always pick out a very dull, respectable woman by the hideousness of her clothes. I expect Miss Tabitha is dull."

"She is—most unquestionably! But I'm afraid she is only a reflex of country life generally, Cicely. Country life *is* dull,—especially in England."

"Then why do you go in for it?" queried Cicely, arching her black brows perplexedly.

"Simply to escape something even duller,"—laughed Maryllia—"London society and its 'Souls'!"

Cicely laughed too, and shrugged her shoulders expressively. She understood all that was implied. And with her whole heart she rejoiced that her friend whom she loved with an almost passionate adoration and gratitude, had voluntarily turned her back on the 'Smart Set,' and so, of her own accord, instead of through her godfathers and godmothers, had 'renounced the devil and all his works, the pomps and vanity of this wicked world and all the sinful lusts of the flesh.'

Within a very few days St. Rest became aware of Cicely's

quaint personality, for she soon succeeded in making herself familiar with everybody in the place. She had a knack of winning friends. She visited old Josey Letherbarrow, and made him laugh till he nearly choked, so that Maryllia had to pat him vigorously on the back to enable him to recover his breath—she cut jokes with Mrs. Tapple,—chatted with the sexton, Adam Frost, and scattered 'sweeties' galore among all his children,—and she furthermore startled the village choir at practice by suddenly flitting into the church and asking Miss Eden, the schoolmistress, to allow her to play the organ accompaniment, and on Miss Eden's consenting to this proposition, she played in such a fashion that the church seemed filled with musical thunder and the songs of angels,—and the village choristers, both girls and boys, became awestruck and nervous, and huddled themselves together in a silent group, afraid to open their mouths lest a false note should escape, and spoil the splendour of the wonderful harmony that so mysteriously charmed their souls. And then, calming the passion of the music down, she turned with gentlest courtesy to Miss Eden, and asked: 'What were the children going to sing?'—whereupon, being told that it was a hymn called 'The Lord is my Shepherd,' she so very sweetly entreated them to sing it with her, that none of them could refuse. And she led them all with wondrous care and patience, giving to the very simple tune, a tender and noble pathos such as they had never heard before, yet which they unconsciously absorbed into their own singing, as they lifted up their youthful voices in tremulous unison.

"The Lord is my Shepherd ; I shall not want,
He maketh me down to lie,
In pleasant fields where the lilies grow,
And the river runneth by.

The Lord is my Shepherd ; He feedeth me
In the depth of a desert land ;
And, lest I should in the darkness slip,
He holdeth me by the hand.

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want,
My mind on Him is stayed,
And though through the Valley of Death I walk,
I shall not be afraid.

The Lord is my Shepherd; O Shepherd sweet,
Leave me not here to stray;
But guide me safe to Thy heavenly fold,
And keep me there, I pray!"

John Walden, passing through the churchyard just at this time, heard the rhythmic rise and fall of the quaint old melody with a strange thrill at his heart. He had listened to the self-same hymn over and over again,—every year the school-children re-studied and re-sang it,—but there was something altogether new in its harmony this time,—something appealing and pathetic which struck to the inmost core of his sensitive nature. Noiselessly, he entered the church, and for a moment or two stood unobserved, watching the little scene before him. Cicely was at the organ, and her hands still rested on the keys, but she was speaking to the members of the choir.

"That is very nicely done,"—she said, encouragingly—"But you must try and keep more steadily together in tune, must they not, Miss Eden?"—and she turned to the schoolmistress at her side, who, with a smile, agreed. "You"—and she touched pretty Susie Prescott on the arm,—"You sing delightfully! It is a little voice—but so very sweet!"

Susie blushed deeply and curtsied. It had got about in the village that Miss Vancourt's young friend from Paris was a musical 'prodigy,' and praise from her was something to be remembered.

"Now listen!" went on Cicely—"I'm not going to sing full voice, because I'm not allowed to yet,—but this is how that hymn should go!" And her pure tones floated forth *pianissimo*, with slow and tender solemnity:—

"The Lord is my Shepherd; O Shepherd sweet,
Leave me not here to stray;
But guide me safe to Thy heavenly fold,
And keep me there, I pray!
Amen."

Silence followed. The children stood wonder-struck, and Miss Eden's eyes filled with emotional tears.

"How beautiful!" she murmured—"How very beautiful!"

Cicely rose from the organ-stool, and turned round.

"Here is Mr. Walden," she said, in quite a matter-of-fact way as she perceived him. "It *is* Mr. Walden, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," replied John, advancing with a smile—"And very fortunate Mr. Walden is to have heard such lovely singing!"

"Oh, that's not lovely," said Cicely, carelessly—"I was only humming the last verse, just to put the expression right. I thought it must be you!—though, of course, as I have not been introduced to you, I couldn't be sure! Maryllia—Miss Vancourt—has told me all about you,—and I know she has written twice since I've been here to ask you up to the Manor—once to tea, and once to dinner. Why haven't you come?"

Walden was slightly embarrassed by this point-blank question. It was perfectly true he had received two invitations from the Lady of the Manor, and had refused both. Why he had refused, he could not himself have told.

"I suppose you didn't want to meet me!" said Cicely, showing all her white teeth in a flashing smile—"But there's no escape for it, you see,—here I am! I'm not such a rascal as I look, though! I've been playing accompaniments for the children!—go on singing, please!"—and she addressed Miss Eden and Susie Prescott, who collecting their straying thoughts, began hesitatingly to resume the interrupted practice—"It's a nice little organ—very full and sweet. The church is perfectly exquisite! I come in every day to look at it except Sundays."

"Why except Sundays?" asked Walden, amused.

She gave him a quaint side-glance.

"I'll tell you some day,—not now!"—she answered—"This is not the fitting time or place." She moved to the altar rails, and hung over them, looking at the alabaster sarcophagus. "This thing has a perfect fascination for me!" she went on—"I can't bear not to know whose bones are inside! I wonder you haven't opened it."

"It was not meant to be opened by those who closed it," said Walden, quietly.

Cicely drooped her gipsy-bright eyes.

"That's one for me!" she thought—"He's just like what Maryllia says he is,—very certain of his own mind, and not likely to move out of his own way."

"I think," pursued Walden—"if you knew that someone very dear to you had been laid in that sarcophagus 'to eternal rest,' you would resent any disturbance of even the mere dust of what was once life,—would you not?"

"I might;" said Cicely dubiously—"But I have never had any 'someone very dear to me' except Maryllia Vancourt. And if she died, I should die too!"

John was silent, but he looked at her with increased interest and kindliness.

They walked out of the church together, and once in the open air, he became politely conventional.

"And how is Miss Vancourt?" he enquired.

"She is very well indeed,"—replied Cicely—"But tremendously busy just now with no end of household matters. The new agent, Mr. Stanways, is going over every yard of the Abbot's Manor property with her, and she is making any quantity of new rules. All the tenants' rents are to be reduced, for one thing—I know *that*. Then there are a lot of London people coming down to stay—big house-parties in relays,—I've helped write all the invitations. We shall be simply crowded at the end of June and all July. We mean to be very gay!"

"And you will like that, of course?" queried Walden, indulgently, while conscious of a little sense of hurt and annoyance, though he knew not why.

"Naturally!" and Cicely shrugged her shoulders carelessly, "Doesn't the Bible say 'the laughter of fools is like the crackling of thorns under a pot'? I love to set the pot down and hear the thorns crackle!"

What a weird girl she was! He looked at her in mute amaze, and she smiled.

"Do come up to tea some afternoon!" she said coaxingly, "We should be so glad to see you! I know Maryllia would like it—she thinks you are rather rude, you know! I'm to be here all the summer, but I'll try to be good and not say things to vex you. And as you're a clergyman, I can tell you all about myself—like the confessional secrets! And when you hear some of my experiences, you won't wonder a bit at my queer ways. I can't be like other girls of my age,—I really *can't*!—my life won't let me!"

Her tone was one of light banter, but her eyes were wistful and pathetic. Walden was conscious of a sudden sympathy with this wild little soul of song, and taking her hand, pressed it kindly.

"Wait till I see some of your 'queer ways,' as you call them!" he said, with a genial laugh—"I know you sing very beautifully—is that a 'queer way'?"

Cicely shook her mop-like tresses of hair back over her shoulders with a careless gesture.

"It is—to people who can't do it!" she said. "Surely you know that? For example, if you preach very well—I don't know that you do, because I've never heard you, but Maryllia's housekeeper, Mrs. Spruce, says you've got 'a mouth of angels'—she does really!" and, as Walden laughed, she laughed with him—"Well, as I say, if you preach very well with a mouth of angels, there must be several parsons round here who haven't got that mouth, and who say of you, of course metaphorically: 'He hath a devil'! Isn't it so?"

John hesitated.

"No doubt opinions differ,"——he began.

"Oh, of course!—you can get out of it that way, if you like!" she retorted, gaily—"You won't say uncharitable things of the rest of your brethren if you can help it, but you know—yes, you must know that parsons are as jealous of each other and as nasty to each other as actors, singers, writers, or any other 'professional' persons in the world. In fact, I believe if you were to set two spiteful clergymen nagging at each other,

they'd beat any two 'leading ladies' on the operatic stage, for right-down malice and meanness!"

"The conversation is growing quite personal!" said Walden, a broad smile lighting up his fine soft eyes—"Shall we finish it at the Manor when I come up to tea?"

"But are you really coming?" queried Cicely—"And when?"

"Suppose I say this afternoon——" he began. Cicely clapped her hands.

"Good! I'll scamper home and tell Maryllia! I'll say I have met you, and that I've been as impudent as I possibly could be to you——"

"No, don't say that!" laughed Walden—"Say that I have found you to be a very delightful and original young lady——"

"I'm not a young lady,"—said Cicely, decisively—"I was born a peasant on the sea-coast of Cornwall—and I'm glad of it. A 'young lady' nowadays means a milliner's apprentice or a draper's model. I am neither. I am just a girl—and hope, if I live, to be a woman. I'll take my own ideas of a suitable message from you to Maryllia—don't *you* bother!" And she nodded sagaciously. "I won't make ructions, I promise! Come about five!"

She waved her hand and ran off, leaving Walden in a mood between perplexity and amusement. She was certainly an 'original,' and he hardly knew what to make of her. There was something 'uncanny' and goblin-like in her appearance, and yet her sallow face had a certain charm when the smile illumined it, and the light of aspiration burned up in the large wild eyes. In any case, she had persuaded him in a moment, as it were, and almost involuntarily, to take tea at the Manor that afternoon. Why he had consented to do what he had hitherto refused, he could not imagine. Cicely's remark that Miss Vancourt thought him 'rather rude,' worried him a little.

"Perhaps I have been rude,"—he reflected, uneasily—"But I am not a society man;—I'm altogether out of my element in the company of ladies—and it seemed so much better that I should avoid being drawn into any intimacy with persons

who are not likely to have anything in common with me—but of course I ought to be civil—in fact, I suppose I ought to be neighbourly——"

Here a sudden irritation against the nature of his own thoughts disturbed him. He was not arguing fairly with himself, and he knew it. He was perfectly aware that ever since the day of their meeting in the village post-office, he had wished to see Miss Vancourt again. He had hoped she might pass the gate of the rectory, or perhaps even look into his garden for a moment,—but his expectation had not been realised. He had heard of Cicely Bourne's arrival,—and he had received two charmingly-worded notes from Maryllia, inviting him to the Manor,—which invitations, as has already been stated, he had, with briefest courtesy, declined. Now, why,—if he indeed wished to see her again,—had he deliberately refused the opportunities given him of doing so? He could not answer this at all satisfactorily to his own mind, and he was considerably annoyed with himself to be forced to admit the existence of certain portions of his mental composition which were apparently not to be probed by logic, or measured by mathematics.

"Well, at any rate, as I have promised the little singer, I can go up to tea just this once, and have done with it," he decided—"I shall then be exonerated from 'rudeness'—and I can explain to Miss Vancourt—quite kindly and courteously of course—that I am not a visiting man,—that my habits are rather those of a recluse, and then—for the future—she will understand."

Cicely Bourne, meanwhile, on her way back to the Manor through the fields, paused many times to gather cowslips, which were blooming by thousands in the grass at her feet, and as she recklessly pulled up dozens of the pale-green stems, weighted with their nodding golden honey-bells, she thought a good deal about John Walden.

"Maryllia never told me he was handsome,"—she mused; "But he is! I wonder why she didn't mention it? So odd of her,—because really there are very few good-looking men

anywhere, and one in the shape of a parson is a positive rarity and ought to go on exhibition! He's clever too—and—obstinate? Yes, I should say he was obstinate! But he has kind eyes. And he isn't married. What a comfort *that* is! Parsons are uninteresting enough in themselves as a rule, but their wives are the last possibility in the way of dullness. Oh, that honeysuckle!" And she sprang over the grass to the corner of a hedge where a long trail of the exquisitely-scented flower hung temptingly, as it seemed within reach, but when she approached it, she found it just too high above her to be plucked from the bough where its tendrils twined. Looking up at it, she carolled softly:

"O Fortune capricieuse!
Comme tu es cruelle!
Pourquoi moques-tu ton esclave
Qui sert un destin immortel!"

Here a sudden rustle in the leaves on the other side of the hedge startled her, and a curious-looking human head adorned profusely with somewhat disordered locks of red hair perked up enquiringly. Cicely jumped back with an exclamation.

"Saint Moses! What is it?"

"It is me! Merely me!" and Sir Morton Pippitt's quondam guest, Mr. Julian Adderley, rose to his full lanky height, and turned his flaccid face of more or less comic melancholy upon her—"Pray do not be alarmed! I have been reposing under the trees,—and I was, or so I imagine, in a brief slumber, when some dulcet warblings as of a nightingale awoke me"—here, stooping to the ground for his hat, he secured it, and waved it expressively—"and I have, I fear, created some dismay in the mind of the interesting young person who, if I mistake not, is a friend of Miss Vancourt?"

Cicely surveyed him with considerable amusement.

"Never mind who *I* am!" she said, coolly—"Tell me who *you* are! My faith!—you are as rough all over as a bear! What have you been doing to yourself? Your clothes are covered with leaves!"

"Even as a Babe in the Wood!" responded Adderley, "Yes!—it is so!" and he began to pick off delicately the various burs and scraps of forest débris which had collected and clung to his tweed suit during his open-air *siesta*—"To speak truly, I am a trespasser in these domains,—they are the Manor woods, I know,—forbidden precincts, and possibly guarded by spring-guns. But I heeded not the board which speaks of prosecution. I came to gather bluebells,—innocent bluebells!—merely that and no more, to adorn my humble cot,—I have a cot not far from here. And as for my identity, my name is Adderley—Julian Adderley—a poor scribbler of rhymes—*à votre service!*"

He waved his hat with a grand flourish again, and smiled.

"Oh *I* know!" said Cicely—"Maryllia has spoken of you—you've taken a cottage here for the summer. Pick that bit of honeysuckle for me, will you?—that long trail just hanging over you!"

"With pleasure!" and he gathered the coveted spray and handed it to her.

"Thanks!" and she smiled appreciatively as she took it. "How did you get into that wood? Did you jump the hedge?"

"I did!" replied Adderley.

"Could you jump it again?"

"Most assuredly!"

"Then do it!"

Whereupon Adderley clapped his hat on his head, and resting a hand firmly on one of the rough posts which supported the close green barrier between them, vaulted lightly over it and stood beside her.

"Not badly done!"—said Cicely, eyeing him quizzically—"for 'a poor scribbler of rhymes' as you call yourself. Most men who moon about and write verse are too drunken and vicious to even see a hedge,—much less jump over it."

"Oh, say not so!" exclaimed Adderley—"You are too young to pass judgment on the gods!"

"The gods!" exclaimed Cicely—"Whatever are you talking

about? The gods of Greece? They were an awful lot—perfectly awful! They wouldn't have been admitted *even* into modern society, and that's bad enough. I don't think the worst woman that ever dined at a Paris restaurant with an English Cabinet Minister would have spoken to Venus, *par exemple*. I'm sure she wouldn't. She'd have drawn the line there!"

"Gracious Heavens!" and Adderley stared in wonderment at his companion, first up, then down,—at her wild hair, now loosened from its convent form of pigtail, and scarcely restrained by the big sun-hat which was tied on anyhow,—at her great dark eyes,—at her thin angular figure and long scraggy legs,—legs which were still somewhat too visible, though since her arrival at Abbot's Manor Maryllia had made some thoughtful alterations in the dress of her musical protégée which had considerably improved her appearance—"Is it possible to hear such things——"

"Why, of course it is, as you've got ears and *have* heard them!" said Cicely, with a laugh—"Don't ask 'is it possible' to do a thing when you've done it! That's not logical,—and men do pride themselves on their logic, though I could never find out why. Do you like cowslips?" And she thrust the great bunch she had gathered up against his nose—"There's a wordless poem for you!"

Inhaling the fresh fine odour of the field blossoms, he still looked at her in amazement, she meeting his gaze without the least touch of embarrassment.

"You can walk home with me, if you like!"—she observed condescendingly—"I won't promise to ask you into the Manor, because perhaps Maryllia won't want you, and I daresay she won't approve of my picking up a young man in the woods. But it's rather fun to talk to a poet,—I've never met one before. They don't come out in Paris. They live in holes and corners, drinking absinthe to keep off hunger."

"Alas, that is so!" and Adderley began to keep pace with the thin black-stockinged legs that were already starting off through the long grass and flowers—"The arts are at a discount nowadays. Poetry is the last thing people want to read."

"Then why do you write it?" and Cicely turned a sharp glance of enquiry upon him—"What's the good?"

"There you offer me a problem Miss—er—Miss——"

"Bourne,"—finished Cicely—"Don't fight with my name—it's quite easy—though I don't know how I got it. I ought to have been a Tre or a Pol—I was born in Cornwall. Never mind that,—go on with the 'problem.'"

"True—go on with the problem,"—said Julian vaguely, taking off his hat and raking his hair with his fingers as he was wont to do when at all puzzled—"The problem is—'why do I write poetry if nobody wants to read it'—and 'what's the good'? Now, in the first place, I will reply that I am not sure I write 'poetry.' I try to express my identity in rhythm and rhyme—but after all, that expression of myself may be prose, and wholly without interest to the majority. You see? I put it to you quite plainly. Then as to 'what's the good?'—I would argue 'what's the bad?' So far, I live quite harmlessly. From the unexpected demise of an uncle whom I never saw, I have a life-income of sixty pounds a year. I am happy on that—I desire no more than that. On that I seek to evolve myself into *something*—from a nonentity into shape and substance—and if, as is quite possible, there can be no 'good,' there may be a certain less of 'bad' than might otherwise chance to me. What think you?"

Cicely surveyed him scrutinisingly.

"I'm not at all sure about that"—she said—"Poets have all been doubtful specimens of humanity at their best. You see their lives are entirely occupied in writing what isn't true—and of course it 'tells' on them in the long run. They deceive others first, and then they deceive themselves, though in their fits of 'inspiration' as they call it, they may, while weaving a thousand lies, accidentally hit on one truth. But the lies chiefly predominate. Dante, for example, was a perfectly brazen liar. He *didn't* go to Hell, or Purgatory, or Paradise—and he *didn't* bother himself about Beatrice at all. He married someone else and had a family. Nothing could be more commonplace. He invented his *Inferno* in order to put

his enemies there, all roasting, boiling, baking or freezing. It was pure personal spite—and it is the very force of his vindictiveness that makes the *Inferno* the best part of his epic. The portraits of Dante alone are enough to show you the sort of man he was. *What* a creature to meet in a dark lane at midnight!"

Here she made a grimace, drawing her mouth down into the elongated frown of the famous Florentine, with such an irresistibly comic effect that Adderley gave way to a peal of hearty, almost boyish laughter.

"That's right!" said Cicely approvingly—"That's *you*, you know! It's natural to laugh at your age—you're only about six or seven-and-twenty, aren't you?"

"I shall be twenty-seven in August,"—he said with a swift return to solemnity—"That is, as you will admit, getting on towards thirty."

"Oh, nonsense! Everybody's getting on towards thirty, of course—or towards sixty, or towards a hundred. I shall be fifteen in October, but 'you will admit'"—here she mimicked his voice and accent—"that I am getting on towards a hundred. Some folks think I've turned that already, and that I'm entering my second century, I talk so 'old.' But my talk is nothing to what I feel—I feel—oh!" and she gave a kind of angular writhe to her whole figure—"like twenty Methusalehs in one girl!"

"You are an original!"—said Julian, nodding at her with an air of superior wisdom—"That's what you are!"

"Like you, Sir Moon-Calf"—said Cicely—"The word 'moon-calf,' you know, stands for poet—it means a human calf that grazes on the moon. Naturally the animal never gets fat,—nor will you; it always looks odd—and so will you; it never does anything useful,—nor will you; and it puts a kind of lunar crust over itself, under which crust it writes verses. When you break through its crust you find something like a man, half-asleep—not knowing whether he's man or boy, and uncertain whether to laugh or be serious till some girl pokes fun at him—and then——"

"And then?"—laughed Adderley, entering vivaciously into her humour—"What next?"

"This, next!"—and Cicely pelted him full in the face with one of her velvety cowslip-bunches—"And this,—catch me if you can!"

Away she flew over the grass, with Adderley after her. Through tall buttercups and field daisies they raced each other like children,—startling astonished bees from repasts in clover-cups—and shaking butterflies away from their *amours* on the starwort and celandines. The private gate leading into Abbot's Manor garden stood open,—Cicely rushed in, and shut it against her pursuer who reached it almost at the same instant.

"Too bad!" he cried laughingly—"You mustn't keep me out! I'm bound to come inside!"

"Why?" demanded Cicely, breathless with her run, but looking all the better for the colour in her cheeks and the light in her eyes—"I don't see the line of argument at all. Your hair is simply dreadful! You look like Pan, heated in the pursuit of a coy nymph of Delphos. If you only wore skins and a pair of hoofs, the resemblance would be perfect!"

"My dear Cicely!" said a dulcet voice at this moment,—"Where *have* you been all the morning! How do you do, Mr. Adderley? Won't you come in?"

Adderley took off his hat, as Maryllia came across to the gate from the umbrageous shadow of a knot of pine-trees, looking the embodiment of fresh daintiness, in a soft white gown trimmed with wonderfully knotted tufts of palest rose ribbon, and wearing an enchanting 'poke' straw hat with a careless knot of pink hyacinths tumbling against her lovely hair. She was a perfect picture 'after Romney,' and Adderley thought she knew it. But there he was wrong. Maryllia knew little and cared less about her personal appearance.

"Where have you been?" she repeated, taking Cicely round the waist—"You wild girl! Do you know it is lunch time? I had almost given you up. Spruce said you had gone into the village—but more than that she couldn't tell me."

"I did go to the village,"—said Cicely—"and I went into the church, and played the organ, and helped the children sing a hymn. And I met the parson, Mr. Walden, and had a talk with him. Then I started home across the fields, and found this man"—and she indicated Adderley with a careless nod of her head—"asleep in a wood. I almost promised him some lunch—I didn't *quite*——"

"My dear Miss Vancourt!"—protested Adderley—"Pray do not think of such a thing!—I would not intrude upon you in this unceremonious way for the world!"

"Why not?" said Maryllia, smiling graciously—"It will be a pleasure if you will stay to luncheon with us. Cicely has *carte blanche* here you know—genius must have its way!"

"Of course it must!"—agreed Cicely—"If genius wants to stand on its head, it must be allowed to make that exhibition of itself lest it should explode. If genius asks the lame, halt, blind and idiotic into the ancestral halls of Abbot's Manor, then the lame, halt, blind and idiotic are bound to come. If genius summons the god Pan to pipe a roundelay, pipings there shall be! Shall there not, Mr. Pan Adderley?"

Her eyes danced with mirth and mischief, as they flashed from his face to Maryllia's. "Genius,"—she continued—"can even call forth a parson from the vasty deep if it chooses to do so,—Mr. Walden is coming to tea this afternoon."

"Indeed!" And Maryllia's sweet voice was a trifle cold. "Did you invite him, Cicely?"

"Yes. I told him that you thought it rather rude of him not to have come before——"

"Oh Cicely!" said Maryllia reproachfully—"You should not have said that!"

"Why not? You did think him rude,—and so did I,—to refuse two kind invitations from you. Anyhow he seemed sorry, and said he'd make up for it this afternoon. He's really quite good-looking."

"Quite—quite!" agreed Julian Adderley—"I considered him exceptionally so when I first saw him in his own church, opposing a calm front to the intrusive pomposity and appalling

ignorance of our venerable acquaintance, Sir Morton Pippitt. I decided that I had found a Man. So new!—so fresh! That is why I took a cottage for the summer close by, that I might be near the rare specimen!"

Maryllia laughed.

"Are you not a man yourself?" she said.

"Not altogether!" he admitted,—"I am but half-grown. I am a raw and unpleasing fruit even to my own palate. John Walden is a ripe and mellow creature,—moreover, he seems still ripening in constant sunshine. I go every Sunday to hear him preach, because he reminds me of so much that I had forgotten."

Here they went into luncheon. Maryllia threw off her hat as she seated herself at the head of the table, ruffling her hair with the action into prettier waves of brown-gold. Her cheeks were softly flushed,—her blue eyes radiant.

"You are a better parishioner than I am, Mr. Adderley!" she said—"I have not been to church once since I came home. I never go to church."

"Naturally! I quite understand! Few people of any education or intelligence can stand it nowadays," he replied—"The Christian myth is well-nigh exploded. Yet one cannot help having a certain sympathy and interest in men, who, like Mr. Walden, appear to still honestly believe in it."

"The Christian myth!" echoed Cicely—"My word! You do lay down the law! Where should we be without the 'myth' I wonder?"

"Pretty much where we are now,"—said Julian—"Two thousand years of the Christian dispensation leaves the world still pagan. Self-indulgence is still paramount. Wealth still governs both classes and masses. Politics are still corrupt. Trade still plays its old game of 'beggar my neighbour.' What would you! And in this day there is no restraining influence on the laxity of social morals. Literature is decadent,—likewise Painting;—Sculpture and Poetry are moribund. Man's inborn monkeyishness is obtaining the upper hand and bearing him back to his natural filth,—and the

glimmerings of the Ideal as shown forth in a few examples of heroic and noble living are like the flash of the rainbow-arch spanning a storm-cloud,—beautiful, but alas!—evanescent."

"I'm afraid you are right"—said Maryllia, with a little sigh; "It is very sad and discouraging, but I fear very true."

"It's nothing of the kind!"—declared Cicely, with quick vehemence—"It's just absolute nonsense! It is! Ah, 'never shake thy gory locks at me,' Sir Moon-Calf!" and she made a little grimace across the table at Julian, who responded to it with a complacent smile—"You can talk, talk, talk—of course! every man that ever sat in clubs, smoking and drinking, can talk one's head off—but you've got to *live*, as well as talk! What do you know about self-indulgence being 'paramount,' except in your own case, eh? Do you think at all of the thousands and thousands of poor creatures everywhere, who completely sacrifice their lives to the needs of others?"

"Of course there are such—" admitted Adderley; "But——"

"No 'buts' come into the case," went on the young girl, her eyes darkening with the earnestness of her thoughts—"I have seen quite enough even in my time to know how good and kind to one another even the poorest people can be. And I have had plenty of hardships to endure, too! But I can tell you one thing—and that is, that the Christian 'myth' as you call it, is just the one thing that makes *my* life worth living! I don't want to talk about religion—I never do,—I only just say this—that the great lesson of Christianity is exactly what we most need to learn."

"In what way?" asked Julian, smiling indulgently.

"Why,—merely that if one is honest and true, one *must* be crucified. Therefore one is prepared,—and there's no need to cry out when the nails are driven in. The Christian 'myth' teaches us what to expect, how to endure, and how at last to triumph!"

A lovely light illumined her face, and Maryllia looked at her very tenderly. Adderley was silent.

"Nothing does one so much good as to be hurt,"—went on

Cicely in a lighter tone—"You then become aware that you are a somebody whom other bodies envy. You never know how high you have climbed till you feel a few dirty hands behind you trying to pull you down! When I start my career as a singer, I shall not be satisfied till I get anonymous letters every morning, telling me what a fraud and failure I am. Then I shall realise that I am famous!"

"Alas!" said Julian with a comically resigned air—"I shall never be of sufficient importance for that! No one would waste a penny stamp on me! All I can ever hope to win is the unanimous abuse of the press. That will at least give me an interested public!"

They laughed.

"Is Mr. Marius Longford a great friend of yours?" enquired Maryllia.

"Ah, that I cannot tell!" replied Julian—"He may be friend, or he may be foe. He writes for a great literary paper—and is a member of many literary clubs. He has produced three books—all monstrously dull. But he has a Clique. Its members are sworn to praise Longford, or die. Indeed, if they do not praise Longford, they become mysteriously exterminated, like rats or beetles. I myself have praised Longford, lest I also get a dose of his unfailing poison. He will not praise me—but no matter for that. If he would only abuse me!—but he won't! His blame is far more valuable than his eulogy. At present he stands like a kind of neutral whipping-post—very much in my way!"

"He knows Lord Roxmouth, he tells me,"—went on Maryllia; whereat Cicely's sharp glance flashed at her inquisitively—"Lord Roxmouth is by way of being a patron of the arts."

The tone of her voice, slightly contemptuous, was not lost on Adderley. He fancied he was on dangerous ground.

"I have never met Lord Roxmouth myself"—he said—"But I have heard Longford speak of him. Longford however rather 'makes' for society. I do not. Longford is quite at home with dukes and duchesses——"

"Or professes to be—" put in Maryllia, with a slight smile.

"Or professes to be,—I accept the correction!" agreed Adderley.

"Personally, I know nothing of him,"—said Maryllia—"I have never seen him at any of the functions in London, and I should imagine him to be a man who rather over-estimated himself. So many literary men do. That is why most of them are such terrible social bores."

"To the crime of being a literary man I plead not guilty!" and Julian folded his hands in a kind of mock-solemn appeal—"Moreover, I swear never to become one!"

"Good boy!" smiled Cicely—"Be a modern Pan, and run away from all the literary cliques, kicking up the dust behind you in their faces as you go! Roam the woods in solitude and sing!

"'The wind in the reeds and the rushes,
The bees on the bells of thyme,
The birds on the myrtle bushes,
The cicale above in the lime,
And the lizards below in the grass,
Were as silent as ever old Tmolus was,
Listening to my sweet pipings!'"

"Ah, Shelley!" cried Adderley—"Shelley the divine! And how divinely you utter his lines! Do you know the last verse of that poem:—'I sang of the dancing stars'?"

Cicely raised her hand, commanding attention, and went on:

"'I sang of the dancing stars,
I sang of the dædal Earth,
And of Heaven,—and the giant wars,
And Love and Death and Birth.
And then I changed my pipings,—
Singing, how down the vale of Menalus,
I pursued a maiden and clasped a reed,
Gods and men, we are all deluded thus!
It breaks in our bosom and then we bleed;
All wept, as I think both ye now would,
If envy or age had not frozen your blood,
At the sorrow of my sweet pipings!'"

"Beau-tiful!—beau-tiful!" sighed Adderley—"But so remote!—so very remote! Alas!—who reads Shelley now?"

"I do"—said Cicely—"Maryllia does. You do. And many more. Shelley didn't write for free-libraries and public-houses. He wrote for the love of Art,—and he was drowned. You do the same, and perhaps you'll be hung! It doesn't much matter how you end, so long as you begin to be something no one else can be."

"*You* have certainly begun in that direction!" said Julian.

Cicely shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know! I am myself. Most people try to be what they're not. Such a waste of time and effort! That's why I've taken a fancy to the parson I met this morning, Mr. Walden. He is himself and no other. He is as much himself as old Josey Letherbarrow is. Josey is an individuality. So is Mr. Walden. So is Maryllia. So am I. And"—here she pointed a witch-like finger at Adderley—"so would you be, if you didn't 'pose' as much as you do!"

"Cicely!" murmured Maryllia, warningly, though she smiled.

A slight flush swept over Adderley's face. But he took the remark without offence, thereby showing himself to be of better mettle than the little affectations of his outward appearance indicated.

"You think so?" he said, placidly—"That is very dear of you!—very young! You may be right—you may be wrong,—but from one so unsophisticated as yourself it is a proposition worth considering—to pose, or not to pose! It is so new—so fresh!"

CHAPTER XVI

WALDEN kept his promise and duly arrived to tea at the Manor that afternoon. He found his hostess in the library with Cicely and Julian. She was showing to the latter one or two rare 'first editions,' and was talking animatedly, but she broke off her conversation the moment he was announced, and advanced to meet him with a bright smile.

"At last, Mr. Walden!" she said—"I am glad Cicely has succeeded where I failed, in persuading you to accept the welcome that has awaited you here for some time!"

The words were gracefully spoken, with just the faintest trace of kindly reproach in their intonation. Simple as they were, they managed to deprive John of all power to frame a suitable reply. He bowed over the little white hand extended to him, and murmured something which was inaudible even to himself, while he despised what he considered his own foolishness, clumsiness and general ineptitude from the bottom of his heart. Maryllia saw his embarrassment, and hastened to relieve him of it.

"We have been talking books,"—she said, lightly—"Mr. Adderley has almost knelt in adoration before my Shakespeare 'first folio.' It is very precious, being uncalendared in the published lists of ordinary commentators. I suppose you have seen it?"

"Indeed I have"—replied Walden, as he shook hands with Cicely and nodded pleasantly to Julian—"I'm afraid, Miss Vancourt, that if you knew how often I have sat alone

in this library, turning over the precious volumes, you might be very angry with me! But I have saved one or two from the encroaches of damp, such as the illuminated vellum 'Petrarch,' and some few rare manuscripts—so you must try to forgive my trespass. Mrs. Spruce used to let me come in and study here whenever I liked."

"Will you not do so still?" queried Maryllia, sweetly—"I can promise you both solitude and silence."

Again a wave of awkwardness overcame him. What could he say in response to this friendly and gentle graciousness?

"You are very kind,"—he murmured.

"Not at all. The library is very seldom used—so the kindness will be quite on your side if you can make it of service. I daresay you know more about the books than I do. My father was very proud of them."

"He had cause to be,"—said Walden, beginning to recover his equanimity and ease as the conversation turned into a channel which was his natural element—"It is one of the finest collections in England. The manuscripts alone are worth a fortune." Here he moved to the table where Adderley stood turning over a wondrously painted 'Book of Hours'—"That is perfect twelfth-century work"—he said—"There is a picture in it which ought to please Miss Cicely," and he turned the pages over tenderly—"Here it is,—the loveliest of Saint Cecilias, in the act of singing!"

Cicely smiled with pleasure, and hung over the beautifully illuminated figure, surrounded with angels in clouds of golden glory.

"There's one thing about Heaven which everybody seems agreed upon,"—she said—"It's a place where we're all expected to sing!"

"Not a doubt of it!" agreed Walden—"You will be quite in your element!"

"The idea of Heaven is remote—so very remote!" said Adderley—"But if such a place existed, and I were bound to essay a vocal effort there, I should transform it at once to Hell! The angels would never forgive me!"

They laughed.

"Let us go into the garden"—said Maryllia—"It is quite lovely just now,—there are such cool deep shadows on the lawn."

Cicely at once ran out, beckoning Adderley to follow. Maryllia tied on her hat with its pink strings and its bunch of pink hyacinths tumbling against her small shell-like ear, and looked up from under its brim with an entrancing smile.

"Will you come, Mr. Walden?"

John murmured something politely inarticulate in assent. He was, as has already been stated, apt to be rather at a loss in the company of women, unless they were well-seasoned matrons and grandames, with whom he could converse on the most ordinary and commonplace topics, such as the curing of hams, the schooling of children, or the best remedies for rheumatism. A feminine creature who appeared to exist merely to fascinate the eye and attract the senses, moved him to a kind of mental confusion, which affected himself chiefly, as no one, save the most intimate of his friends, would ever have noticed it, or guessed that he was at any sort of pains to seem at ease. Just now, as he took his soft shovel-hat, and followed his fair hostess out on the lawn, his mind was more or less in a state of chaos, and the thoughts that kept coming and going were as difficult to put into consecutive order as a Chinese puzzle. One uncomfortable memory however sat prominently in a corner of his brain like the mocking phantasm of a mischievous Puck, pointing its jeering finger and reminding him of the fact, not to be denied, that but a short while ago, he had made up his mind to dislike, ay, even to detest, that mysterious composition of white and rose, blue eyes and chestnut-gold hair, called Maryllia Vancourt,—that he had resolved she would be an altogether objectionable personage in the village—*his* village—of St. Rest,—and that he had wished—Ah! what had he wished? Back, O teazing reminder of the grudging and suspicious spirit that had so lately animated the soul of a Christian cleric! Yet it had to be admitted, albeit now reluctantly, that he had actually

wished the rightful mistress of Abbot's Manor had never returned to it! Smitten with sorest compunction at the recollection of his former blind prejudice against the woman he had then never seen, he walked by her side over the warm soft grass, listening with a somewhat preoccupied air to the remarks she was making concerning Cicely Bourne, and the great hopes she entertained of the girl's future brilliant career.

"Really," she declared, "the only useful thing I have ever done in my life is to rescue Cicely from uncongenial surroundings, and provide her with all she needs for her musical studies. To help bring out a great genius gives *me* some little sense of importance, you see! In myself I am such an utter nonentity."

She laughed. Walden looked at her with an earnestness of which he was scarcely conscious. She coloured a little, and her eyes fell. Something in the sudden delicate flush of her cheeks and the quick droop of her eyelashes startled him,—he felt a curious sense of contrition, as though he had given her some indefinable, altogether shadowy cause for that brief discomposure. The idea that she seemed, even for a second, not quite so much at her ease, restored his own nerve and self-possession, and it was with an almost paternal gentleness that he said:

"Do you really consider yourself a nonentity, Miss Vancourt? I am sure the society you have left behind you in London does not think you so."

She opened her sea-blue eyes full upon him.

"Society? Why do you speak of it? Its opinion of me or of anyone else, is surely the last thing a sensible man or woman would care for, I imagine! One 'season' of it was enough for me. I have unfortunately had several 'seasons,' and they were all too many."

Again Walden looked at her, but this time she did not seem to be aware of his scrutiny.

"Do you take me for a member of the 'smart' set, Mr. Walden?" she queried, gaily—"You are very much mistaken if you do! I have certainly mixed with it, and know all about

it—much to my regret—but I don't belong to it. Of course I like plenty of life and amusement, but 'society' as London and Paris and New York express it in their modes and manners and 'functions,' is to me the dullest form of entertainment in the world."

Walden was silent. She gave him a quick side-glance of enquiry.

"I suppose you have been told something about me?" she said—"Something which represents me otherwise than as I represent myself. Have you?"

At this abrupt question John fairly started out of his semi-abstraction in good earnest.

"My dear Miss Vancourt!" he exclaimed, warmly—"How can you think of such a thing! I have never heard a word about you, except from good old Mrs. Spruce who knew you as a child, and who loves to recall these days,—and—er—and——"

He broke off, checking himself with a vexed gesture.

"And—er—and—er—who else?" said Maryllia, smiling——"Now don't play tricks with *me*, or I'll play tricks with *you*!"

His eyes caught and reflected her smile.

"Well,—Sir Morton Pippitt spoke of you once in my hearing"—he said—"And a friend of his whom he brought to see the church, the Duke of Lumpton. Also a clergyman in this neighbourhood, a Mr. Leveson—rector at Badsworth—*he* mentioned you, and presumed"—here John paused a moment,—"yes, I think I may say presumed—to know you personally."

"Did he really! I never heard of him!" And she laughed merrily. "Mr. Walden, if I were to tell you the number of people who profess to know *me* whom *I* do not know and never *will* know, you would be surprised! I never spoke to Sir Morton Pippitt in my life till the other day, though he pretends he has met me,—but he hasn't. He may have seen me perhaps by chance when I was a child in the nursery, but I don't remember anything about him. My

father never visited any of the people here,—we lived very much to ourselves. As for the Duke of Lumpton,—well!—nobody knows him that can possibly avoid it—and I have never even so much as seen him. Aunt Emily may possibly have spoken of me in these persons' hearing—that's quite likely,—but they know nothing of me at first hand." She paused a moment. "Look at Cicely!" she said—"How quickly she makes friends! She and Mr. Adderley are chattering away like two magpies!"

Walden looked in the direction indicated, and saw the couple at some distance off, under the great cedar-tree which was the chief ornament of the lawn,—Cicely seated in a low basket-chair, and Adderley stretched on the grass at her feet. Both were talking eagerly, both were gesticulating excitedly, and both looked exactly what they were, two very eccentric specimens of humanity.

"They seem perfectly happy!" he said, smiling—"Adderley is a curious fellow, but I think he has a good heart. He puts on a mannerism, because he has seen the members of a certain literary 'set' in London put it on—but he'll drop that in time,—when he is a little older and wiser. He has been in to see me once or twice since he took up his residence here for the summer. He tries to discuss religion with me—or rather, I should say, irreligion. His own special 'cult' is the easy paganism of Omar Kayyám."

"Is he clever?"

"I think he is. He has a more or less original turn of mind. He read me some of his verses the other day."

"Poor you!" laughed Maryllia.

"Well, I was inclined to pity myself when he first began"—said Walden, laughing also—"But I must confess I was agreeably surprised. Some of his fancies are quite charming."

They had been walking slowly across the lawn, and were now within a few steps of the big cedar-tree.

"I must take you into the rose-garden, Mr. Walden!"—and she raised her eyes to his with that childlike confiding look which was one of her special charms,—"The roses are just

budding out, and I want you to see them before the summer gets more advanced. Though I daresay you know every rose-bush in the place, don't you?"

"I believe I do!" he admitted—"You see an old fogey like myself is bound to have hobbies, and my particular hobby is gardening. I love flowers, and I go everywhere I can, or may, to see them and watch their growth. So that for years I have visited your rose-garden, Miss Vancourt! I have been a regular and persistent trespasser,—but all the same, I have never plucked a rose."

"Well, I wish you had!" said Maryllia, feeling somewhat impatient with him for calling himself an 'old fogey,'—why did he give himself away?—she thought,—"I wish you had plucked them all and handed them round in baskets to the villagers, especially to the old and sick persons. It would have been much better than to have had them sold at Riversford through Oliver Leach."

"Did he sell them?" exclaimed John, quickly—"I am not surprised!"

"He sold everything, and put the money in his own pocket"—said Maryllia,—"But, after all, the loss is quite my own fault. I ought to have enquired into the management of the property myself. And I certainly ought not to have stayed away from home so many years. But it's never too late to mend!" She smiled, and advancing a step or two called "Cicely!"

Cicely turned, looking up from beneath her spreading canopy of dark cedar boughs.

"Oh, Maryllia, we're having such fun!" she exclaimed—"Mr. Adderley is talking words, and I'm talking music! We'll show you how it goes presently!"

"Do, please!" laughed Maryllia; "It must be delightful! Mr. Walden and I are going into the rose-garden. We shall be back in a few minutes!"

She moved along, her white dress floating softly over the green turf, its delicate flounces and knots of rosy ribbon looking like a trail of living flowers. Walden, walking at her side,

nodded smilingly as he passed close by Cicely and Julian, his tall athletic figure contrasting well with Maryllia's fairy-like grace,—and presently, crossing from the lawn to what was called the 'Cherry-Tree Walk,' because the path led under an arched trellis work over which a couple of hundred cherry-trees were trained to form a long arbour or pergola, they turned down it, and drawing closer together in conversation, under the shower of white blossoms that shed fragrance above their heads, they disappeared. Cicely, struck by a certain picturesqueness, or what she would have called a 'stage effect' in the manner of their exit, stopped abruptly in the *pianissimo* humming of a tune with which she declared she had been suddenly inspired by some lines Adderley had just recited.

"Isn't she pretty!" she said, indicating with a jerk of her ever gesticulating hand the last luminous glimmer of Maryllia's vanishing gown—"She's like Titania,—or Kilmeny in Fairy-land. Why don't you write something about *her*, instead of about some girl you 'imagine' and never see?"

Adderley, lying at his ease on the grass, turned on his arm and likewise looked after the two figures that had just passed, as it seemed, into a paradise of snowy flowers.

"The girls I 'imagine' are always so much better than those I see,"—he replied, with uncomplimentary candour.

"Thank you!" said Cicely—"You are quite rude, you know! But it doesn't matter."

He stared up at her in vague astonishment.

"Oh, I didn't mean you!" he explained—"You're not a girl."

"No, really!" ejaculated Cicely—"Then what am I, pray?"

He looked at her critically,—at her thin sallow little face with the intense eyes burning like flame under her well-marked black eyebrows,—at her drooping angular arms and unformed figure, tapering into the scraggy, long black-stockinged legs which ended in a pair of large buckled shoes that covered feet of a decidedly flat-iron model,—then he smiled oddly.

"You are a goblin!"—he said—"An elf,—a pixie—a witch! You were born in a dark cave where the sea dashed in at high

tide and made the rough stones roar with music. There were sea-gulls nesting above your cradle, and when the wind howled, and you cried, they called to you wildly in such a plaintive way that you stopped your tears to listen to them, and to watch their white wings circling round you. You are not a girl—no! —how can you be? For when you grew a little older, the invisible people of the air took you away into a great forest, and taught you to swing yourself on the boughs of the trees, while the stars twinkled at you through the thick green leaves, —and you heard the thrushes sing at morning and the nightingales at evening, till at last you learned the trill and warble and the little caught sob in the throat which almost breaks the heart of those who listen to it! And so you have become what you are, and what I say you always will be—a goblin—a witch!—not a girl, but a genius!"

He waved his hand with a fantastic gesture and raked up his hair.

"That's all very well and very pretty,"—said Cicely, showing her even white teeth in a flashing 'goblin' grin,—"But of course you don't mean a word of it! It's merely a way of talking, such as poets, or men that call themselves poets, affect when the 'fit' is on them. Just a string of words,—mere babble! You'd better write them down, though,—you mustn't waste them! Publishers pay for so many words I believe, whether they're sense or nonsense,—please don't lose any halfpence on my account! Do you know you are smiling up at the sky as if you were entirely mad? Ordinary people would say you were,—people to whom dinner is the dearest thing in life would suggest your being locked up. And me, too, I daresay! You haven't answered my question,—why don't you write something about Maryllia?"

"She, too, is not a girl,"—rejoined Adderley—"She is a woman. And she is absolutely unwritable!"

"Too lovely to find expression even in poetry,"—said Cicely, complacently.

"No no!—not that! Not that!" And Adderley gave a kind of serpentine writhe on the grass as he raised himself to

a half-sitting posture—"Gentle Goblin, do not mistake me! When I say that Miss Vancourt is unwritable, I would fain point out that she is above and beyond the reach of my Muse. I cannot 'experience' her! Yes—that is so! What a poet needs most is the flesh model. The flesh model may be Susan, or Sarah, or Jane of the bar and tap-room,—but she must have lips to kiss, hair to touch, form to caress——"

"Saint Moses!" cried Cicely, with an excited wriggle of her long legs—"Must she?"

"She must!" declared Julian, with decision—"Because when you have kissed the lips, you have experienced a 'sensation,' and you can write—'Ah, how sweet the lips I love.' You needn't love them, of course,—you merely try them. She must be amenable and good-natured, and allow herself to be gazed at for an hour or so, till you decide the fateful colour of her eyes. If they are blue, you can paraphrase George Meredith on the 'Blue is the sky, blue is thine eye' system—if black, you can recall the 'Lovely as the light of a dark eye in woman,' of Byron. She must allow you to freely encircle her waist with an arm, so that having felt the emotion you can write—'How tenderly that yielding form, Thrills to my touch!' And then,—even as a painter who pays so much per hour for studying from the life,—you can go away and forget her—or you can exaggerate her charms in rhyme,—or 'imagine' that she is fairer than Endymion's moon-goddess—for so long as she serves you thus she is useful,—but once her uses are exhausted, the poet has done with her, and seeks a fresh sample. Hence, as I say, your friend Miss Vancourt is above my clamour for the Beautiful. I must content myself with some humbler type, and 'imagine' the rest!"

"Well, I should think you must, if that's the way you go to work!" said Cicely, with eyes brimful of merriment and mischief—"Why you are worse than the artists of the Quartier Latin! If you must needs 'experience' your models, I wonder that Susan, Sarah and Jane of the bar and tap-room are good enough for you!"

"Any human female suffices,"—murmured Julian, drowsily, "Provided she is amenable,—and is not the mother of a large family. At the spectacle of many olive branches, the Muse shrieks a wild farewell!"

Cicely broke into a peal of laughter.

"You absurd creature!" she said—"You don't mean half the nonsense you talk—you know you don't!"

"Do I not? But then, what do I mean? Am I justified in assuming that I mean anything?" And he again ran his fingers through his ruddy locks abstractedly. "No,—I think not! Therefore, if I now make a suggestion, pray absolve me from any serious intentions underlying it—and yet——"

"'And yet'—what?" queried Cicely, looking at him with some curiosity.

"Ah! 'And yet'! Such little words, 'and yet'!" he murmured—"They are like the stepping-stones across a brook which divides one sweet woodland dell from another! 'And yet'!" He sighed profoundly, and plucking a daisy from the turf, gazed into its golden heart meditatively. "What I would say, gentle Goblin, is this,—you call me Moon-calf, therefore there can be no objection to my calling you Goblin, I think?"

"Not the least in the world!" declared Cicely—"I rather like it!"

"So good of you!—so dear!" he said, softly—"Well!—'and yet'—as I have observed, the Muse may, like the Delphic oracle, utter words without apparent signification which only the skilled proficient at her altar may be able to unravel. Therefore,—in this precise manner, my suggestion may be wholly without point,—or it may not."

"Please get on with it, whatever it is,"—urged Cicely, impatiently—"You're not going to propose to me, are you? Because, if so, it's no use. I'm too young, and I only met you this morning!"

He threw the daisy he had just plucked at her laughing face.

"Goblin, you are delicious!" he averred—"But the ghastly spectre of matrimony does not at present stand in my path,

luring me to the frightful chasms of domesticity, oblivion and despair. What was it the charming Russian girl Bashkirtseff wrote on this very subject? 'Me marier et'——?"

"I can tell you!" exclaimed Cicely—"It was the one sentence in the whole book that made all the men mad, because it showed such utter contempt for them! 'Me marier et avoir des enfants? Mais—chaque blanchisseuse peut en faire autant! Je veux la gloire!' Oh, how I agree with her! Moi, aussi, je veux la gloire!"

Her dark eyes flamed into passion,—for a moment she looked almost beautiful. Adderley stared languidly at her as he would have stared at the heroine of an exciting scene on the stage, with indolent, yet critical interest.

"Goblin *incroyable*!" he sighed—"You are so new!—so fresh!"

"Like salad just gathered," said Cicely, calming down suddenly from her burst of enthusiasm—"And what of your 'suggestion'?"

"My suggestion," rejoined Adderley—"is one that may seem to you a strange one. It is even strange to myself! But it has flashed into my brain suddenly,—and even so inspiration may affect the dullard. It is this: Suppose the Parson fell in love with the Lady, or the Lady fell in love with the Parson? Either, neither, or both?"

Cicely sat up straight in her chair as though she had been suddenly pulled erect by an underground wire.

"What do you mean?" she asked—"Suppose the parson fell in love with the lady or the lady with the parson! Is it a riddle?"

"It may possibly become one;" he replied, complacently—"But to speak more plainly—suppose Mr. Walden fell in love with Miss Vancourt, or Miss Vancourt fell in love with Mr. Walden, what would you say?"

"Suppose a Moon-calf jumped over the moon!" said Cicely disdainfully—"Saint Moses! Maryllia is as likely to fall in love as I am,—and I'm the very last possibility in the way of sentiment. Why, whatever are you thinking of? Maryllia

has heaps of men in love with her,—she could marry to-morrow if she liked."

"Ay, no doubt she could marry—that is quite common—but perhaps she could not love!" And Julian waved one hand expressively. "To love is so new!—so fresh!"

"But Maryllia would never fall in love with a *parson*!" declared Cicely, almost resentfully—"A parson!—a country parson too! The idea is perfectly ridiculous!"

A glimmer of white in the vista of the flowering 'Cherry-Tree Walk' here suddenly appeared and warned her that Maryllia and the Reverend John were returning from their inspection of the rose-garden. She checked herself in an outburst of speech and silently watched them approaching. Adderley watched them too with a kind of lachrymose interest. They were deep in conversation, and Maryllia carried a bunch of white and blush roses which she had evidently just gathered. She looked charmingly animated, and now and then a light ripple of her laughter floated out on the air as sweet as the songs of the birds chirming around them.

"The roses are perfectly lovely!" she exclaimed delightedly, as she came under the shadow of the great cedar-tree; "Mr. Walden says he has never seen the standards so full of bud." Here she held the cluster she had gathered under Cicely's nose. "Aren't they delicious! Oh, by the bye, Mr. Walden, I have promised you one! You must have it, in return for the spray of lilac you gave me when I came to see *your* garden! Now you must take a rose from mine!" And, laying all the roses on Cicely's lap, she selected one delicate half-opened blush-white bloom. "Shall I put it in your coat for you?"

"If you will so far honour me!" answered Walden;—he was strangely pale, and a slight tremor passed over him as he looked down at the small fingers,—pink-tipped as the petals of the flower they so deftly fastened in his button-hole; "And how"—he continued, with an effort, addressing Cicely and Julian—"How have Music and Poetry got on together?"

"Oh, we're not married yet,"—said Cicely, shaking off the

dumb spell which Adderley's 'suggestion' had for a moment cast upon her mind—"We ought to be, of course,—for a real good opera. But we're only just beginning courtship. Mr. Adderley has recited some lines of his own composition, and I have improvised some music. You shall hear the result some day."

"Why not now?" queried Maryllia, as she seated herself in another chair next to Cicely's under the cedar boughs, and signed to Walden to do the same.

"Why, because I believe that the tea is about to arrive. I saw the majestic Primmins in the distance, wrestling with a table—didn't you, Mr. Adderley?"

Adderley rose from his half recumbent position on the grass, and shading his eyes from the afternoon sunshine, looked towards the house.

"Yes,—it is even so!" he replied—"Primmins and a subordinate are on the way hither with various creature comforts. Music and Poetry must pause awhile. Yet why should there be pause? It is for this that I am a follower of Omar Kayyám. He was a materialist as well as a spiritualist, and his muse admits of the aforesaid creature comforts as much as the exalted and subtle philosophies and ironies of life."

"Poor Omar!" said Walden,—"The pretty piteousness of him is like the wailing of a lamb led to the slaughter. Grass is good to graze on, saith lambkin,—other lambs are fair to frisk with,—but alas!—neither grass nor lambs can last, and therefore as lambkin cannot always be lambkin, it bleats its end in Nothingness! But, thank God, there is something stronger and wiser in the Universe than lambkin!"

"True!" said Adderley, "But even lambkin has a right to complain of its destiny."

Walden smiled.

"I think not,"—he rejoined—"No created thing has a right to complain of its destiny. It finds itself Here,—and the fact that it *is* Here is a proof that there is a purpose

for its existence. What that purpose is we do not know yet, but we *shall* know!"

Adderley lifted dubious eyelids.

"You think we shall?"

"Most assuredly! What does Dante Rossetti say?—

'The day is dark and the night
To him that would search their heart;
No lips of cloud that will part
Nor morning song in the light;
Only, gazing alone
To him wild shadows are shown,
Deep under deep unknown,
And height above unknown height
Still we say as we go:
"Strange to think by the way
Whatever there is to know
That shall we know one day."'"

He recited the lines softly, but with eloquent emphasis. "You see, those of us who take the trouble to consider the working and progress of events, know well enough that this glorious Creation around us is not a caprice or a farce. It is designed for a Cause and moves steadily towards that Cause. There may be—no doubt there are—many men who elect to view life from a low, material, or even farcical standpoint—nevertheless, life in itself is serious and noble."

Cicely's dark face lightened as with an illumination while she listened to these words. Maryllia, who had taken up the roses she had laid in Cicely's lap, and was now arranging them afresh, looked up suddenly.

"Yet there are many searching truths in the philosophy of Omar Kayyám, Mr. Walden,"—she said—"Many sad facts that even our religion can scarcely get over, don't you think so?"

He met her eyes with a gentle kindliness in his own.

"I think religion, if true and pure, turns all sad facts to sweetness, Miss Vancourt,"—he said—"At least, so I have found it."

The clear conviction of his tone was like the sound of a silver bell calling to prayer. A silence followed, broken only by the singing of a little bird aloft in the cedar-tree, whose ecstatic pipings aptly expressed the unspoilt joys of innocence and trust.

"One pretty verse of Omar I remember," then said Cicely, abruptly, fixing her penetrating eyes on Walden,—"And it really isn't a bit irreligious. It is this:—

'The Bird of Life is singing on the bough,
His two eternal notes of "I and Thou"—
O hearken well, for soon the song sings through,
And would we hear it, we must hear it Now!'"

A white rose slipped from the cluster Maryllia held, and dropped on the grass. John stooped for it, and gave it back to her. Their hands just touched as she smiled her thanks. There was nothing in the simple exchange of courtesies to move any self-possessed man from his normal calm, yet a sudden hot thrill and leap of the heart dazed Walden's brain for a moment and made him almost giddy. A sick fear—an indefinable horror of himself possessed him,—caught by this unnameable transport of sudden and singular emotion, he felt he could have rushed away, away!—anywhere out of reach and observation, and have never entered the fair and halcyon gardens of Abbot's Manor again! Why?—in Heaven's name, why? He could not tell,—but—he had no right to be there!—no right to be there!—he kept on repeating to himself;—he ought to have remained at home, shut up in his study with his dog and his books,—alone, alone, always alone! The brief tempest raged over his soul with soundless wind and fire,—then passed, leaving no trace on his quiet features and composed manner. But in that single instant an abyss had been opened in the depths of his own consciousness,—an abyss into which he looked with amazement and dread at the strange foolhardiness which had involuntarily led him to its brink,—and he now drew back from it, nervously shuddering.

"'And would we hear it, we must hear it Now!'" repeated

Adderley, with opportune bathos at this juncture—"As I have said, and will always maintain, Omar's verse always fits in with the happy approach of creature comforts! Behold the illustration and example!—Primmins with the tea!"

"It is a pretty verse, though, isn't it?" queried Cicely, moving her chair aside to make more space for the butler and footman as they nimbly set out the afternoon tea-table in the deepest shade bestowed by the drooping cedar boughs—"Isn't it?"

And her searching eyes fastened themselves pertinaciously upon John's face.

"Very pretty!" he answered, steadily—"And—so far as it goes—very true!"

CHAPTER XVII

AFTER tea, they re-entered the house at Maryllia's request, to hear Cicely play. Arrived in the drawing-room they found the only truly modern thing in it, a grand piano, of that noted French make which as far surpasses the German model as a genuine Stradivarius surpasses a child's fiddle put together yesterday, and, taking her seat at this instrument, Cicely had transformed both herself and it into unspeakable enchantment. The thing of wood and wire and ivory keys had become possessed, as it were, with the thunder of the battling clouds and the great rush of the sea,—and then it had suddenly whispered of the sweetness of love and life, till out of storm had grown the tender calm of a flowing melody, on which wordless dreams of happiness glittered like rainbow bubbles on foam, shining for a moment and then vanishing at a breath; it had caught the voices of the rain and wind,—and the pattering drops and sibilant hurricane had whizzed sharply through the scale of sound till the very notes seemed alive with the wrath of nature,—and then it had rolled all the wild clamour away into a sustained magnificence of prayerful chords which seemed to plead for all things grand, all things true, all things beautiful,—and to lift the soul of man in panting, labouring ecstasy up to the very threshold of Heaven! And she—the 'goblin' who evoked all this phantasmagoria of life set in harmony—she too changed as it seemed, in nature and aspect,—her small meagre face was as the face of a pictured angel, with the dark hair clustering round it in thick knots and curling waves as of blackest

bronze,—while the eyes, full of soft passion and fire, glowed beneath the broad temples with the light of youth's imperial dream of fame. What human creature could accept the limited fact of being mere man, mere woman only, while Cicely played? Such music as hers recalled and revealed the earliest splendour of the days when Poesy was newly born,—when gods and goddesses were believed to walk the world in large and majestic freedom,—and when brave deeds of chivalry and self-sacrifice became exalted by the very plenitude of rich imagination, into supernatural facts of heaven-conquering, hell-charming prowess. Not then was man made to seem uncouth, or mean and savage in his attempts to dominate the planet, but strong, fearless, and endowed with dignity and power. Not then was every noble sentiment derided,—every truth scourged,—every trust betrayed,—every tenderness mocked,—and every sweet emotion made the subject of a slander or a sneer. Not then was love mere lust, marriage mere convenience, and life mere covetousness of gain. There was something higher, greater, purer than these,—something of the inspiring breath of God, which, according to the old Biblical narrative, was breathed into humanity with the words—"Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness." That 'image' of God was featured gloriously in the waves of music which surged through Cicely's brain and fingers, out on the responsive air,—and when she ceased playing there followed a dumb spell of wonderment and awe, which those who had listened to her marvellous improvisation were afraid to break by a word or movement. And then, with a smile at their mute admiration and astonishment, she had passed her small supple hands lightly again over the piano-keys, evoking therefrom a playful prelude, and the pure silvery sound of her voice had cloven the air asunder with De Musset's 'Adieu, Suzon!'

> "Adieu, Suzon, ma rose blonde,
> Qui m'as aimé pendant huit jours!
> Les plus courts plaisirs de ce monde
> Souvent font les meilleurs amours.

Sais-je au moment où je te quitte
Où m'entraîne mon astre errant?
Je m'en vais pourtant, ma petite
Bien loin, bien vite,
Adieu, Suzon!"

Was it possible for any man with a drop of warm blood flowing through his veins, not to feel a quicker heart-beat, a swifter pulse, at the entrancing, half-melancholy, half-mocking sweetness she infused into these lines?

"Je pars, et sur ma levre ardente
Brûle encor ton dernier baiser.
Entre mes bras, chère imprudente
Ton beau front vient de reposer.
Sens-tu mon cœur, comme il palpite?
Le tien, comme il battait gaiment!
Je m'en vais pourtant, ma petite,
Bien loin, bien vite
Toujours t'aimant!
Adieu, Suzon!"

With the passion, fire and exquisite *abandon* of her singing of this verse in tones of such youthful freshness and fervour as could scarcely be equalled and never surpassed, Adderley could no longer restrain himself, and crying 'Brava!—brava! Bravissima!' fell to clapping his hands in the wildest ecstasy. Walden, less demonstrative, was far more moved. Something quite new and strange to his long fixed habit and temperament had insidiously crept over him,—and being well accustomed to self-analysis, he was conscious of the fact, and uneasy at finding himself in the grip of an emotion to which he could give no name. Therefore, he was glad when,—the music being ended, and when he had expressed his more or less incoherent praise and thanks to Cicely for the delight her wonderful gift had afforded him,—he could plead some business in the village as an excuse to take his departure. Maryllia very sweetly bade him come again.

"As often as you like,"—she said—"And I want you to promise me one thing, Mr. Walden!—you must consent

to meet some of my London friends here one evening to dinner."

She had given him her hand in parting, and he was holding it in his own.

"I'm afraid I should be very much in the way, Miss Vancourt,"—he replied, with a grave smile—"I am not a social acquisition by any means! I live very much alone,—and a solitary life, I think, suits me best."

She looked at him thoughtfully, and withdrew her hand.

"That means that you do not care to come,"—she said, simply—"I am so sorry you do not like me!"

The blood rushed up to his brows.

"Miss Vancourt!" he stammered—"Pray—pray do not think——"

But here she turned aside to receive Adderley's farewells and thanks for the charming afternoon he had spent in her company. After this, and when Julian had made his exit, accompanied by Cicely who wanted him to give her a written copy of certain verses he had composed, Maryllia again spoke:

"Well, at any rate, I shall send you an invitation to one of my parties, whether you come or not, Mr. Walden!" she said, playfully—"Otherwise, I shall feel I have not done my social duty to the minister of the parish! It will be for some evening during the next three weeks. I hope you will able to accept it. If not——"

A sudden resolve inspired John's hesitating soul. Taking the hand she offered, he raised it lightly to his lips with all the gallantry of an old-world courtier rather than a modern-time parson.

"If you wish me to accept it, it shall be accepted!"—he said, and his voice shook a little—"Forgive me if in any way I have seemed to you discourteous, Miss Vancourt!—I am so much of a solitary, that 'society' has rather an intimidating effect upon me,—but you must never"—here he looked at her full and bravely—"You must never say again or think that I do not like you! I *do* like you!"

Her eyes met his with pure and candid earnestness.

"That is kind of you,"—she said—"And I am glad! Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!"

And so he left her presence.

When he started to walk home across the fields, Adderley proffered his companionship, which could not in civility be refused. They left the Manor grounds together by the little wicket-gate, and took the customary short-cut to the village. The lustrous afternoon light was mellowing warmly into a deeper saffron glow,—a delicate suggestion of approaching evening was in the breath of the cooling air, and though the uprising orb of Earth had not yet darkened the first gold cloud beneath the western glory of the sun, there was a gentle murmur and movement among the trees and flowers and birds, which indicated that the time for rest and sleep was drawing nigh. The long grasses rustled mysteriously, and the small unseen herbs hidden under them sent up a pungently sweet odour as the two men trod them down on their leisurely way across the fields,—and it was with a certain sense of relief from mental strain that Walden lifted his hat and let the soft breeze fan his temples, which throbbed and ached very strangely as though with a weight of pent-up tears. He was very silent,—and Julian Adderley, generally accustomed to talk for two, seemed disposed to an equal taciturnity. The few hours they had spent in the society of Maryllia Vancourt and her weird protégée, Cicely Bourne, had given both men subject for various thoughts which neither of them was inclined to express to the other. Walden, in particular, was aware of a certain irritation and uneasiness of mind which troubled him greatly and he looked askance at his companion with unchristian impatience. The long-legged, red-haired poet was decidedly in his way at the present moment,—he would rather have been alone. He determined in any case not to ask him to enter the rectory garden,—more of his society would be intolerable,—they would part at the gate,—

"I'm afraid I'm boring you, Mr. Walden,"—said the

unconscious object of his musings, just then—"I am dull! I feel myself under a cloud. Pray excuse it!"

The expression of his face was comically lachrymose, and John felt a touch of compunction at the nature of his own immediate mental attitude towards the harmless 'moon-calf.'

"Don't apologise!" he said, with a frank smile—"I myself am not in a companionable humour. I think Miss Bourne's music has not only put something into us, but taken something out of us as well."

"You are right!" said Julian—"You are perfectly right. And you express the emotion aptly. It was extraordinary music! But that voice! That voice will be a wonder of the world!"

"It is a wonder already"—rejoined Walden—"If the girl keeps her health and does not break down from nervous excitement and overstrain, she will have a dazzling career. I think Miss Vancourt will take every possible care of her."

"Miss Vancourt is very lovely,"—said Adderley reflectively, "I have made up my mind on that point at last. When I first saw her, I was not convinced. Her features are imperfect. But they are mobile and expressive—and in the expression there is a subtle beauty which is quite provocative. Then again, my own 'ideals' of women have always been tall and queenly,—yet in Miss Vancourt we have a woman who is queenly without being tall. It is the regal air without the material inches. And I am now satisfied that the former is more fascinating than the latter. Though I admit that it was once my dream to die upon the breast of a tall woman!"

Walden laughed forcedly. He was vexed to be compelled to listen to Adderley's criticism of Maryllia Vancourt's physical charms, yet he was powerless to offer any remonstrance.

"But, after all," continued Julian, gazing up into the pink and mauve clouds of the kindling sunset,—"The tall woman might possibly, from the very coldness of her height, be unsympathetic. She might be unclaspable. Juno seems ever more repellent than Venus or Psyche. Then again, there are so many large women. They are common. They obstruct

the public highway. They tower forth in theatre-stalls, and nod jewelled tiaras from the elevation of opera-boxes, blocking out the view of the stage. They are more often assertive than lovable. Therefore let me not cling to an illusion which will not bear analysis. For Miss Vancourt is not a tall woman,—nor for that matter is she short,—she is indescribable, and therefore entirely bewitching!"

John said nothing, but only walked on a trifle more quickly.

"You are perhaps not an admirer of the fair sex, Walden?" pursued his companion—"And therefore my observations awaken no sympathy in your mind?"

"I never discuss women,"—replied Walden, drily—"I am not a poet, you see,—" and he smiled—"I am merely a middle-aged parson. You can hardly expect me to share in your youthful enthusiasms, Adderley! You are going up the hill of life,—I am travelling down. We cannot see things from the same standpoint." Here, they left the fields and came to the high road,—thence a few more paces brought them to the gate of the rectory. "But I quite agree with you in your admiration of Miss Vancourt. She seems a most kindly and charming lady—and—I believe—I am sure"—and his remarks became somewhat rambling and disjointed—"yes—I am sure she will try to do good in the village now that she has taken up her residence here. That is, of course, if she stays. She may get tired of country life—that is quite probable—but—it is, of course, a good thing to have a strong social influence in the neighbourhood—especially a woman's influence—and I should say Miss Vancourt will make herself useful and beloved in the parish——"

At this period he caught Adderley's eyes fixed upon him somewhat quizzically, and realised that he was getting quite 'parochial' in his talk. He checked himself abruptly and swung open his garden gate.

"I'm sorry I can't ask you in just now,"—he said—"I have some pressing work to do——"

"Don't mention it!" and Julian clasped him by the hand fervently—"I would not intrude upon you for worlds! You

must be alone, of course. You are delightful!—yes, my dear Walden, you are delicious! So new—so fresh! It is a privilege to know you! Good-bye for the moment! I may come and talk to you another time?"

"Oh, certainly! By all means!" And Walden, shaking hands with all the vigour Adderley's grasp enforced upon him, escaped at last into the sanctuary of his own garden, and hastened under the covering shadow of the trees that bordered the lawn. Adderley watched him disappear, and then went on his own way with a gratified air of perfect complacency.

"Those who 'never discuss women' are apt to be most impressed by them,"—he sagaciously reflected—"The writhings of a beetle on a pin are not so complex or interesting as the writhings of a parson's stabbed senses! Now a remarkable psychological study might be made——My good friend! Kindly look where you are going!"

This last remark was addressed to a half-drunken man who pushed past him roughly without apology, almost jostling him off the foot-path. It was Oliver Leach, who hearing himself spoken to, glanced round sullenly with a muttered oath, and stumbled on.

"That is Miss Vancourt's dismissed agent,"—said Adderley, pausing a moment to watch his uncertain progress up the road. "What an objectionable beast!"

He walked on, and, his former train of thought being entirely disturbed, he went to the 'Mother Huff,' where he was a frequent visitor, his elaborate courtesies to Mrs. Buggins enabling him to hear from that lady's pious lips all the latest news, scandal and gossip, true or untrue, concerning the whole neighbourhood.

Walden, meanwhile, finding himself once more alone in his own domain, breathed freely. The faithful Nebbie, who had passed all the hours of his master's absence, 'on guard' by the window of the vacant study, came running to meet him as he set foot upon the lawn,—three or four doves that were brooding on the old tiled and gabled roof of the rectory, rose aloft in a short flight and descended again, cooing softly as though

with satisfaction at his return,—and there was a soothing silence everywhere, the work of the day being done, and Bainton having left the garden trim and fair to its own sweet solitude and calm. Gently patting his dog's rough head, as the animal sprang up to him with joyous short barks of welcome, John looked about him quietly for a moment or two with an expression in his eyes that was somewhat dreamy and pathetic.

"I have known the old place so long and loved every corner of it!"—he murmured—"And yet,—to-day it seems all strange and unfamiliar!"

The glow of the sunset struck a red flare against the walls of his house, and beat out twinkling diamond flashes from the latticed windows,—the clambering masses of honeysuckle and roses shone forth in vivid clusters as though inwardly illuminated. The warmth and ecstasy of life seemed palpitating in every flush of colour, every shaft of light,—and the wild, voluptuous singing of unseen skylarks, descending to their nests, and shaking out their songs, as it seemed, like bubbles of music breaking asunder in the clear empyrean, expressed the rapture of heaven wedded to the sensuous, living, breathing joys of earth. The glamour and radiance of the air affected Walden with a sudden unwonted sense of fatigue and pain, and pressing one hand across his eyes, he shut out the dazzle of blue sky and green grass for a moment's respite,—then went slowly, and with bent head into his study. Here everything was very quiet,—and, as it struck him then, curiously lonely,—on his desk lay various notes and messages and accounts—the usual sort of paper litter that accumulated under his hands every day,—two or three visiting cards had been left for him during his absence,—one on the part of the local doctor, a very clever and excellent fellow named James Forsyth, who was familiarly called 'Jimmy' by the villagers, and who often joined Walden of an evening to play a game of chess with him,—and another bearing the neat superscription 'Mrs. Mandeville Poreham. The Leas. At Home Thursdays,'—whereat he smiled. Mrs. Mandeville Poreham was a 'county'

lady, wife of a gentleman-at-ease who did nothing but hunt, and who never had done anything in all his life but hunt,—she was also the mother of five marriageable daughters, and her calls on the Reverend John were marked by a polite and patient persistency that seemed altogether admirable. She lived some two miles out of St. Rest, but always attended Walden's church regularly, driving thither with her family in a solemnly closed private omnibus of the true 'county' type. She professed great interest in all Church matters, on the ground that she was herself the daughter of a dead-and-gone clergyman.

"My poor father!" she was wont to say, smoothing her sleek bandeaux of grey hair on either side of her forehead with one long, pale, thin finger—"He was such a good man! Ah yes!—and he had such a lovely mind! My mother was a Beedle."

This last announcement, generally thrown in casually, was apt to be startling to the uninitiated,—and it was not till the genealogy of the Beedle family had been duly explained to the anxious enquirer, that it was seen how important and all-sufficing it was to have had a Beedle for one's maternal parent. The Beedles were a noted 'old stock' in Suffolk, so it appeared,—and to be connected with a Suffolk Beedle was, to certain provincial minds of limited perception, a complete guarantee of superior birth and breeding. Walden was well accustomed to receiving a call from Mrs. Poreham about every ten days or so, and he did his utmost best to dodge her at all points. Bainton was his ready accomplice in this harmless conspiracy, and promptly gave him due warning whenever the Poreham ''bus' or landau was seen weightily bearing down upon the village, with the result that, on the arrival of the descendant of the Beedles at the rectory door she was met by Hester Rockett, the parlourmaid, with a demure smile and the statement,—'Mr. Walden is out, mim.' Then, when Walden, according to the laws of etiquette, had to return the lady's visit, Bainton again assisted him by watching and waiting till he could inform him, "as 'ow he'd seen that blessed old

Poreham woman drivin' out with 'er fam'ly to Riversford. They won't likely be back for a couple of hours at least.' Whereupon Walden straightway took a swinging walk up to 'The Leas,' deposited his card with the footman for the absent 'fam'ly' and returned again in peace to his own dwelling.

This afternoon he had again, as usual, missed the worthy lady, and he set aside her card, the smile with which he had glanced at it changing suddenly to a sigh of somewhat wearied impatience. Surely there was something unusually dark and solitary in the aspect of the room to which, for so many years, he had been accustomed, and where he had generally found comfort and contentment? The vivid hues of the sunset were declining rapidly, and the solemn shadow of evening was creeping up apace over the sky and outer landscape—but something heavier than the mild obscurity of approaching night seemed weighing on the air around him, which oppressed his nerves and saddened his soul. He stood absently turning over the papers on his desk, in a frame of mind which left him uncertain how to employ himself,—whether to read,—to write,—to finish a sketch of the flowering reeds on the river which he had yesterday begun,—or to combat with his own mood, fathom its meaning, and conquer its tendency? There came a light tap at his door and the maid Hester entered with a letter.

"The last post, sir. Only one for you."

He took it up indifferently as the girl retired,—then uttered a slight exclamation of pleasure.

"From Brent,"—he said, half aloud—"Dear old fellow! I have not heard from him since New Year."

He opened the letter, and began to read. The interested look in his eyes deepened,—and he moved nearer to the open window to avail himself as much as possible of the swiftly decreasing light.

"Dear Walden,"—it ran—"The spirit moves me to write to you, not only because it occurs to me that I have failed to do so for a long time, but also because I feel a certain

necessity for thought-expansion to someone, who, like yourself, is accustomed to the habit of thinking. The tendency of the majority nowadays is,—or so it appears to me,—to forget the purpose for which the brain was designed, or rather to use it for no higher object than that for which it is employed by the brute creation, namely to consider the ways and means of securing food, and then to ruminate on the self-gratification which follows the lusts of appetite. In fact, 'to rot and rot,—and thereby hangs a tale!' But before I enter into any particulars of my own special phase or mood, let me ask how it fares with you in your small and secluded parish? All must be well, I imagine, otherwise doubtless I should have heard. It seems only the other day that I came, at your request, to consecrate your beautiful little church of 'The Saint's Rest,'—yet seven years have rolled away since then, leaving indelible tracks of age on me, as probably on you also, my dear fellow!—though you have always carried old Time on your back more lightly and easily than I. To me he has ever been the Arabian Nights' inexorable 'Old Man of the Sea,' whose habit is to kill unless killed. At fifty-one I feel myself either 'rusting' or mellowing; I wonder which you will judge the most fitting appellation for me when we next meet? Mind and memory play me strange tricks in my brief moments of solitude, and whenever I think of you, I imagine it can only be yesterday that we two college lads walked and talked together in the drowsy old streets of Oxford and made our various plans for our future lives with all the superb dominance and assertiveness of youth, which is so delightful while it lasts, despite the miserable deceptions it practises upon us. One thing, however, which I gained in that past time, and which has never deceived me, is your friendship,—and how much I owe to you no one but myself can ever tell. Good God!——how superior you always were, and are, to me! Why did you efface yourself so completely for my sake? I often ask this question, and except for the fact that it would be impossible to you to even make an attempt to override, for mere ambition, anyone for whom you

had a deep affection, I cannot imagine any answer. But as matters have turned out with me I think it might have been better after all, had you been in my place and I in yours! A small 'cure of souls' would have put my mental fibre to less torture, than the crowding cares of my diocese, which depress me more and more as they increase. Many things seem to me hopeless, — utterly irremediable! The shadow of a preponderating, defiant, all-triumphant Evil stalks abroad everywhere—and the clergy are as much affected by it as the laymen. I feel that the world is far more Christ-less to-day after two thousand years of preaching and teaching, than it was in the time of Nero. How has this happened? Whose the fault? Walden, there is only one reply—it is the Church itself that has failed! The message of salvation,—the gospel of love,—these are as God-born and true as ever they were,—but the preachers and teachers of the Divine Creed are to blame,—the men who quarrel among themselves over forms and ceremonies instead of concentrating their energies on ministering to others,—and I confess I find myself often at a loss to dispose Church affairs in such wise as to secure at one and the same time, peace and satisfaction amongst the clergy under me, with proper devotion to the mental and physical needs of the thousands who have a right, yes, a *right* to expect spiritual comfort and material succour from those who profess, by their vows of ordination, to be faithful and disinterested servants of Christ.

"I daresay you remember how we used to talk religious matters over when we were young and enthusiastic men, studying for the Church. You will easily recall the indignation and fervour with which we repudiated all heresies new and old, and turned our backs with mingled pity and scorn on every writer of agnostic theories, estimating such heterodox influences as weighing but lightly in the balance of belief, and making little or no effect on the minds of the majority. We did not then grasp in its full measure the meaning of what is to-day called the 'rush' of life. That blind, brutal stampede of humanity over every corner and quarter of the earth, — a stampede

which it is impossible to check or to divert, and which arises out of a nameless sense of panic, and foreboding of disaster! Like hordes of wild cattle on the prairies, who scent invisible fire, and begin to gallop furiously headlong anywhere and everywhere, before the first red gleam of the devouring element breaks from the undergrowth of dry grass and stubble,—so do the nations and peoples appear to me to-day. Reckless, maddened, fear-stricken and reasonless, they rush hither and thither in search of refuge from themselves and from each other, yet are all the while driven along unconsciously in heterogeneous masses, as though swept by the resistless breath of some mysterious whirlwind, impelling them on to their own disaster. I feel the end approaching, Walden!—sometimes I almost see it! And with the near touch of a shuddering future catastrophe on me, I am often disposed to agree with sad King Solomon that after all 'there is nothing better for a man than that he should eat, drink and be merry all the days of his life.' For I grow tired of my own puny efforts to lift the burden of human sorrow which is laid upon me, aloft on the fainting wings of prayer, to a God who seems wholly irresponsive,—mind, Walden, I say *seems*—so do not start away from my words and judge me as beginning to weaken in the faith that formerly inspired me. I confess to an intense fatigue and hopelessness,—the constant unrelieved consciousness of human wretchedness weighs me down to the dust of spiritual abasement, for I can but think that if God were indeed merciful and full of loving-kindness, He would not, He could not endure the constant spectacle of man's devilish injustice to his brother man! I have no right to permit myself to indulge in such reflections as these, I know,—yet they have gained such hold on me that I have latterly had serious thoughts of resigning my bishopric. But this is a matter involving other changes in my life, on which I should like to have some long friendly talks with you, before taking any decisive step. Your own attitude of mind towards the 'calling and election' you have chosen has always seemed to me so pre-eminently pure and lofty, that I should condemn

my own feelings even more than I do, were I to allow the twin forces of pessimism and despair to possess me utterly without an attempt to bring them under your sane and healthful exorcism, the more so, as you know all my personal history and life-long sorrow. And this brings me to the main point of my letter which is, that I should much like to see you, if you can spare me two or three days of your company any time before the end of August. Try to arrange an early visit, though I know how ill your parishioners can spare you, and how more than likely they are to grumble at your absence. You are to be envied in having secured so much affection and confidence in the parish you control, and every day I feel more and more how wisely you have chosen your lot in that comparative obscurity, which, at one time, seemed to those who know your brilliant gifts, a waste of life and opportunity. Of course you are not without jealous enemies,—no true soul ever is. Sir Morton Pippitt still occasionally sends me a spluttering note of information as to something you have, or have not done, to the church on which you have spent the greater part of your personal fortune; and Leveson, the minister at Badsworth, appears to think that I should assist him by heading a subscription list to obtain funds for the purpose of making his church as perfect a gem of architecture as yours. Due enquiries have been made as to the nature and needs of his parishioners, and it appears that only twenty-five adult persons on an average ever attend his ministrations, and that the building for which he pleads is a brick edifice built in 1870 and deliberately allowed to decay by disuse and neglect. However, Sir Morton Pippitt is taking some interest in it, so I am given to understand,—and perhaps in 'restoring' a modern chapel, he will be able to console himself for the ruthless manner in which you stripped off his 'galvanised tin' roof from your old Norman church walls!

"I am sorry to hear that the historic house of Abbot's Manor is again inhabited, and by one who is likely to be a most undesirable neighbour to you."

Here Walden, unable to read very quickly at the window,

stepped out on the lawn, still holding the letter close to his eyes. "A most undesirable neighbour"—he murmured—"Yes—now let me see!—where is that phrase?—Oh, here it is,—'a most undesirable neighbour.'" And he read on:—

"I allude to Miss Vancourt, the only child of the late Robert Vancourt who was killed some years ago in the hunting field. The girl was taken away at her father's death by her uncle Frederick, who, having sown an unusual crop of wild oats, had married one of those inordinately wealthy American women to whom the sun itself appears little more than a magnified gold piece—and of course between the two she has had a very bad training. Frederick Vancourt was the worst and weakest of the family, and his wife has been known for years as a particularly hardened member of the 'smart' set. Under their tutelage Miss Vancourt, or 'Maryllia Van' as she appears to be familiarly known and called in society, has attained a rather unenviable notoriety; and when I heard the other day that she had left her aunt's house in a fit of ungovernable temper, and had gone to her own old house to live, I thought at once of you with a pang of pity. For, if I remember rightly, you have a great opinion of the Manor as an unspoilt relic of Tudor times, and have always been rather glad that it was left to itself without any modern improvement or innovation. I can imagine nothing worse to your mind than the presence of a 'smart' lady in the unsophisticated village of St. Rest! However, you may take heart of grace, as it is not likely she will stay there long. Rumour asserts that she is shortly to be married to Lord Roxmouth,—he who will be Duke of Ormistoune and owner of that splendid but half-ruined pile, Roxmouth Castle. She has, it appears, kept this poor gentleman dancing attendance on her for a sufficient time to make evident to the world her desire to secure his title, and her present sudden capricious retirement into country life is understood to be a mere *ruse* to draw him more swiftly on to his matrimonial doom. No doubt he has an eye on Mrs. Fred Vancourt's millions, which her niece would inherit in the event of her marrying a future English duke,—

still, from what I gather, he would deserve some compensation for risking his life's happiness with such a very doubtful partner. But I daresay I am retailing information with which you are no doubt already quite familiar, and in all probability 'Maryllia Van' is not likely to cross your path at any time, as among her other reported characteristics is that of a cheap scorn for religion,—a scorn which sits so unbecomingly on our modern women, and forebodes so much disaster in the future, they being the mothers of the coming race. I expect the only circumstance likely to trouble your calm and pleasant routine of life and labour is, that the present occupation of Abbot's Manor may have stopped some of your romantic rambles in the beautiful woods surrounding it! May never any greater care disturb you, my dear fellow!—for even that is one, which, as I have pointed out to you, will be of brief duration. Let me know when you think you will be able to come and spend a couple of days here,—and I will clear my work ahead in order to leave the time free for an entire unburdening of my soul to you, as in the days of our youth, so long ago.—Sincerely and affectionately yours, H. A. BRENT."

Slowly, and with methodical nicety, Walden folded up the letter and put it in his pocket. With a kind of dazed air he looked about him, vaguely surprised that the evening seemed to have fallen so soon. Streaks of the sunset still glowed redly here and there in the sky, but the dense purple of the night had widened steadily over the spaces of the air, and just above the highest bough of the apple-tree on the lawn, the planet Venus twinkled bravely in all its silver panoply of pride as the Evening Star. Low and sweet on the fragrant silence came the dulcet piping of a nightingale, and the soft swishing sound of the river flowing among the rushes, and pushing against the pebbly shore. A sudden smarting sense of pain stung Walden's eyes,—pressing them with one hand he found it wet,—with tears? No, no!—not with tears,—merely with the moisture of strain and fatigue,—his sight was not so good as it used to be;—of course he was getting old,—and

Bishop Brent's small caligraphy had been difficult to decipher by the half-light. All at once something burning and passionate stirred in him,—a wave of chivalrous indignation that poured itself swiftly through every channel of his clean and honest blood, and he involuntarily clenched his hand.

"What liars there are in the world!" he said aloud and fiercely—"What liars!"

Venus, peeping at him over the apple boughs, gave out a diamond-like sparkle as though she were no greater thing than a loving eye,—the unseen nightingale, tuning its voice to richer certainties, broke into a fuller, deeper warble,—more stars flew, like shining fire-flies, into space, and on the lowest line of the western horizon a white cloud fringed with silver, floated slowly, the noiseless herald of the coming moon. But Walden saw nothing of the mystically beautiful transfiguration of the evening into night. His thoughts were elsewhere.

"And yet"—he mused sorrowfully—"How do I know? How can I tell? The clear childlike eyes may be trained to deceive,—the smile of the sweet, all too sweet mouth may be insincere—the pretty, impulsive confiding manner may be a mere trick——and——after all——what is it to me? I demand of myself plainly and fairly—what is it to me?"

He gave a kind of unconscious despairing gesture. Was there some devil in his soul whom he was bound to wrestle with by fasting and prayer, and conquer in the end? Or was it an angel that had entered there, before whose heavenly aspect he must kneel and succumb? Why this new and appalling loneliness which had struck himself and his home-surroundings as with an earthquake shock, shaking the foundations of all that had seemed so safe and secure? Why this feverish restlessness in his mind, which forbade him to occupy himself with any of the work waiting for him to do, and which made him unhappy and ill at ease for no visible or reasonable cause?

He walked slowly across the lawn to his favourite seat under the apple-tree,—and there, beneath the scented fruiting boughs, with the evening dews gathering on the grass at his feet, he

tried manfully to face the problem that troubled his own inner consciousness.

"Let me brave it out!" he said—"Let me realise and master the thoughts that seek to master *me*, otherwise I am no man, but merely a straw to be caught by the idle wind of an emotion. Why should I shirk the analysis of what I feel to be true of myself? For, after all, it is only a weakness of nature,—a sense of regret and loss,—a knowledge of something I have missed in life,—all surely pardonable if quelled in the beginning. She,—Maryllia Vancourt—is only a woman,—I am only a man. There is more than at first seems apparent in that simple qualification 'only'! She, the woman, has charm, and is instinctively conscious of her power, as why should she not be?—she has tried it, and found it no doubt in every case effectual. I, the man, am long past the fervours and frenzies of life,—and charm, whether it be hers or that of any other of her sex, should have, or ought to have, no effect upon me, particularly in my vocation, and with my settled habits. If I am so easily moved as to be conscious of a certain strange glamour and fascination in this girl,—for she is a girl to me, nay almost a child,—that is not her fault, but mine. As well expect the sun not to shine or a bird not to sing, as expect Maryllia Vancourt not to smile and look sweet! Walking with her in her rose-garden, where she took me with such a pretty air of confiding grace, to show me her border of old French damask roses, I listened to her half-serious, sometimes playful talk as in a dream, and answered her kindly questions concerning some of the sick and poor in the village as best I could, though I fear I must occasionally have spoken at random. Oh, those old French damask roses! I have known them growing in that border for years,—yet I never saw them as I saw them to-day,—never looked they so darkly red and glowing!—so large and open-hearted! I fancy I shall smell their fragrance all my life! 'Are they doing well, do you think?'—she said, and the little white chin perked up from under the pink ribbon which tied her hat, and the dark blue eyes gleamed drowsily from beneath their drooping lids,—and

the lips parted, smiling——and then——then came the devil and tempted me! I was no longer middle-aged John Walden, the quiet parson of a country 'cure,'—I was a man unknown to myself,—possessed as it were, by the ghost of a dead youth, clamouring for youthful joy! I longed to touch that delicate little pink-and-white creature, so like a rose herself!—I was moved by an insane desire—yes!—it was insane, and fortunately quite momentary,—such impulses are not uncommon"—and here, as he unravelled, to his own satisfaction, the tangled web of his impressions, his brow cleared, and he smiled gravely,—"I was, I say, moved by an insane desire to draw that dainty small bundle of frippery and prettiness into my arms—yes,—it was so, and why should I not confess it to myself? Why should I be ashamed? Other men have felt the same, though perhaps they do not count so many years of life as I do. At any rate with me the feeling was momentary,—and passed. Then,—some moments later,—under the cedar-tree she dropped a rose from the cluster she had gathered,—and in giving it back to her I touched her hand—and our eyes met."

Here his thoughts became disconnected, and wandered beyond his control. He let them go,—and listened, instead of thinking, to the notes of the nightingale singing in his garden. It was now being answered by others at a distance, with incessant repetitions of a flute-like warble,—and then came the long sobbing trill and cry of love, piercing the night with insistent passion.

"The Bird of Life is singing on the bough,
His two eternal notes of 'I and Thou'—
O hearken well, for soon the song sings through,
And would we hear it, we must hear it Now."

A faint tremor shook him as the lines quoted by Cicely Bourne rang back upon his memory. He rose to go indoors.

"I am a fool!"—he said—"I must not trouble my head any more about a summer day's fancy. It was a kind of 'old moonlight in the blood,' as Hafiz says,—an aching sense of

loss,—or rather a touch of the spring affecting a decaying tree!" He sighed. "I shall not suffer from it again, because I will not. Brent's letter has arrived opportunely,—though I think—nay, I am sure, he has been misinformed. However, Miss Vancourt's affairs have nothing to do with me,—nor need I interest myself in what is not my concern. My business is with those who depend on my care,—I must not forget myself —I must attend to my work."

He went into the house,—and there was confronted in his own hall by a big burly figure clad in rough corduroys,—that of Farmer Thorpe, who doffed his cap and pulled his forelock respectfully at the sight of him.

"'Evenin', Passon!" he said—"I thought as 'ow I'd make bold to coom an' tell ye my red cow's took the turn an' doin' wonderful! Seems a special mussy of th' A'mighty, an' if there's anythin' me an' my darter can do fur ye, ye'll let us know, Passon, for I'm darn grateful, an' feels as 'ow the beast pulled round arter I'd spoke t'ye about 'er. An' though as ye told me, 'tain't the thing to say no prayers for beasties which is worldly goods, I makes a venture to arsk ye if ye'll step round to the farm to-morrer, jest to please Mattie my darter, an' take a look at the finest litter o' pigs as ever was seen in *this* county, barrin' none! A litter as clean an' sweet as daisies in new-mown hay, an' now's the time for ye to look at 'em, Passon, an' choose yer own suckin' beast for bilin' or roastin' which ye please, for both's as good as t'other,—an' there ain't no man about 'ere what desarves a sweet suckin' pig more'n you do, an' that I say an' swear to. It's a real prize litter I do assure you!—an' Mattie my darter, she be that proud, an' all ye wants to do is just to coom along an' choose your own!"

"Thank you, Mr. Thorpe!" said Walden with his usual patient courtesy—"Thank you very much! I will certainly come. Glad to hear the cow is better. And is Miss Thorpe well?"

"She's that foine,"—rejoined the farmer—"that only the pigs can beat 'er! I'll be tellin' 'er you'll coom to-morrer then?"

"Oh yes—by all means! Certainly! Most kind of you, I'm sure! Good-evening, Thorpe!"

"Same t'ye, Passon, an' thank ye kindly!"

Whereat John escaped at last into his own solitary sanctum.

"My work!" he said, with a faint smile, as he seated himself at his desk—"I must do my work! I must attend to the pigs as much as anything else in the parish! My work!"

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was the first Sunday in July. Under a sky of pure and cloudless blue the village of St. Rest lay cradled in floral and foliaged loveliness, with all the glory of the morning sunshine and the full summer bathing it in floods of living gold. It had reached the perfect height of its annual beauty with the full flowering of its orchards and fields, and with all the wealth of colour which was flung like spray against the dark brown thatched roofs of its clustering cottages by the masses of roses, red and white, that clambered as high as the tops of the chimneys, and turning back thence, dropped downwards again in a tangle of blossom, and twined over latticed windows with a gay and gracious air like garlands hung up for some great festival. The stillness of the Seventh Day's pause was in the air,—even the swallows, darting in and out from their prettily contrived nests under the bulging old-fashioned eaves, seemed less busy, less active on their bright pinions, and skimmed to and fro with a gliding ease, suggestive of happy indolence and peace. The doors of the church were set wide open,—and Adam Frost, sexton and verger, was busy inside the building, placing the chairs, as was his usual Sunday custom, in orderly rows for the coming congregation. It was about half-past ten, and the bell-ringers, arriving and ascending into the belfry, were beginning to 'tone' the bells before pealing the full chime for the eleven o'clock service, when Bainton, arrayed in his Sunday best, strolled with a casual air into the churchyard, looked round approvingly for a minute or two, and then with some apparent hesitation, entered the

church porch, lifting his cap reverently as he did so. Once there, he coughed softly to attract Frost's attention, but that individual was too much engrossed with his work to heed any lesser sound than the grating of the chairs he was arranging. Bainton waited patiently, standing near the carved oaken portal, till by chance the verger turned and saw him, whereupon he beckoned mysteriously with a crook'd forefinger.

"Adam! Hi! A word wi' ye!"

Adam came down the nave somewhat reluctantly, his countenance showing signs of evident preoccupation and harassment.

"What now?" he demanded, in a hoarse whisper—"Can't ye see I'm busy?"

"O' coorse you're busy—I knows you're busy,"—returned Bainton, soothingly—"I ain't goin' to keep ye back nohow. All I wants to know is, ef it's true?"

"Ef what's true?"

"This 'ere, wot the folks are all a-clicketin' about,—that Miss Vancourt 'as got a party o' Lunnon fash'nables stayin' at the Manor, an' that they're comin' to church this marnin'?"

"True enough!" said Frost—"Don't ye see me a-settin' chairs for 'em near the poopit? There'll be what's called a 'crush' I can tell ye!—for there ain't none too much room in the church at the best o' times for our own poor folk, but when rich folks comes as well, we'll be put to it to seat 'em. Mr. Primmins, he comes down to me nigh 'arf an hour ago, an' he sez, sez he: 'Miss Vancourt 'as friends from Lunnon stayin' with 'er, an' they're comin' to church this marnin'. 'Ope you'll find room?' An' I sez to 'im, 'I'll do my best, but there ain't no reserve seats in the 'ouse o' God, an' them as comes fust gits fust served.' Ay, it's true enough they're a-comin', but 'ow it got round in the village, I don't know. I ain't sed a wurrd."

"Ill news travels fast,"—said Bainton, sententiously, "Mr. Primmins no doubt called on his young 'ooman at the 'Mother Huff' an' told 'er to put on 'er best 'at. She's a reg'ler telephone tube for information—any bit o' news runs

right through 'er as though she was a wire. 'Ave ye told Passon Walden as 'ow Miss Vancourt an' visitors is a-comin' to 'ear 'im preach?"

"No,"—replied Adam, with some vigour—"I ain't told 'im nothin'. An' I ain't goin' to neither!"

Bainton looked into the crown of his cap, and finding his handkerchief there wiped the top of his head with it.

"It be powerful warm this marnin', Adam,"—he said—"Powerful warm it be. So you ain't goin' to tell Passon nothin',—an' for why, may I ask, if to be so bold?"

"Look 'ere, Tummas,"—rejoined the verger, speaking slowly and emphatically—"Passon, 'e be a rare good man, m'appen no better man anywheres, an' what he's goin' to say to us this blessed Sunday is all settled-like. He's been thinkin' it out all the week. He knows what's what. 'Tain't for us,—'tain't for you nor me, to go puttin' 'im out an' tellin' 'im o' the world, the flesh an' the devil all a-comin' to church. Mebbe he's been a-prayin' to the Lord A'mighty to put the 'Oly Spirit into 'im, an' mebbe he's got it—just *there*." And Adam touched his breast significantly. "Now if *I* goes, or *you* goes and sez to 'im: 'Passon, there's fash'nable folks from Lunnon comin' 'ere to look at ye an' listen to ye, an' for all we kin tell make mock o' ye as well as o' the Gospel itself in their 'arts'—d'ye think he'd be any the better for it? No, Tummas, no! I say leave Passon alone. Don't upset 'im. Let 'im come out of 'is 'ouse wise an' peaceful like as he allus do, an' let 'im speak as the fiery tongues from Heaven moves 'im, an' as if there worn't no fashion nor silly nonsense in the world. He's best so, Tummas!—you b'lieve me,—he's best so!"

"Mebbe—mebbe!" and Bainton twirled his cap round and round dubiously—"But Miss Vancourt——"

"Miss Vancourt ain't been to church once till now,"—said Adam,—"An' she's only comin' now to show it to her friends. I doesn't want to think 'ard of her, for she's a sweet-looking little lady an' a kind one—an' my Ipsie just worships 'er,—an' what my baby likes I'm bound to like too—but I do 'ope she ain't a 'eathen, an' that once comin' to church means comin'

again, an' reg'ler ever arterwards. Anyway, it's for you an' me, Tummas, to leave Passon to the Lord an' the fiery tongues,—we ain't no call to interfere with 'im by tellin' 'im who's comin' to church an' who ain't. Anyone's free to enter the 'ouse o' God, rich or poor, an' 'tain't a world's wonder if strangers worships at the Saint's Rest as well as our own folk."

Here the bells began to ring in perfect unison, with regular rhythm and sweet concord.

"I must go,"—continued Adam—"I ain't done fixin' the chairs yet, an' it's a quarter to eleven. We'll be 'avin' 'em all 'ere d'rectly."

He hurried into the church again just as Miss Eden and her boy-and-girl 'choir' entered the churchyard, and Bainton seeing them, and also perceiving in the near distance the slow halting figure of Josey Letherbarrow, who made it a point never to be a minute late for divine service, rightly concluded that there was no time now, even if he were disposed to such a course, to 'warn Passon' that he would have to preach to 'fash'nable folks' that morning.

"Mebbe Adam's right," he reflected—"An' yet it do worry me a bit to think of 'im comin' out of 'is garden innercent like an' not knowin' what's a-waitin' for 'im. For he's been rare quiet lately—seems as if he was studyin' an' prayin' from mornin' to night, an' he ain't bin nowhere,—an' no one's bin to see 'im, 'cept that scarecrow-lookin' chap, Adderley, which *he* stayed a 'ole arternoon, jabberin' an' readin' to 'im. An' what's mighty queer to me is that he ain't bin fidgetin' over 'is garden like he used to. He don't seem to care no more whether the flowers blooms or doesn't. Them phloxes up against the west wall now—a finer show I never seen—an' as for the lilum candidum, they're a perfect picter. But he don't notice 'em much, an' he's not so keen on his water-lilies as I thought he would be, for they're promisin' better this year than they've ever done before, an' the buds all a-floatin' up on top o' the river just lovely. An' as for vegetables—Lord!—he don't seem to know whether 'tis beans or peas he 'as—there's a kind

o' sap gone out o' the garden this summer, for all that it's so fine an' flourishin'. There's a missin' o' somethin' somewheres!"

His meditations were put to an end by the continuous arrival of all the villagers coming to church;—by twos and threes, and then by half dozens and dozens, they filed in through the churchyard, exchanging brief neighbourly greetings with one another as they passed quietly into the sacred edifice, where the soft strains of the organ now began to mingle with the outside chiming of the bells. Bainton still lingered near the porch, moved by a pardonable curiosity. He was anxious to see the first glimpse of the people who were staying at the Manor, but as yet there was no sign of any one of them, though the time wanted only five minutes to eleven.

The familiar click of the latch of the gate which divided the church precincts from the rectory garden, made him turn his head in that direction, to watch his master approaching the scene of his morning's ministrations. The Reverend John walked slowly, with uplifted head and tranquil demeanour, and, as he turned aside up the narrow path which led to the vestry at the back of the church the faithful 'Tummas' felt a sudden pang. 'Passon' looked too good for this world, he thought,—his dignity of movement, his serene and steadfast eyes, his fine, thoughtful, though somewhat pale countenance, were all expressive of that repose and integrity of soul which lifts a man above the common level, and unconsciously to himself, wins for him the silent honour and respect of all his fellows. And yet there was a touch of pathetic isolation about him, too,—as of one who is with, yet not of, the ordinary joys, hopes, and loves of humanity,—and it was this which instinctively moved Bainton, though that simple rustic would have been at a loss to express the sense of what he felt in words. However there was no more leisure for thinking, if he wished to be in his place at the commencement of service. The servants from Abbot's Manor were just entering the churchyard-gates, marshalled, as usual, by the housekeeper, Mrs. Spruce, and her deaf but ever dutiful husband,—and though Bainton longed

to ask one of them if Miss Vancourt and her guests were really coming, he hesitated,—and in that moment of hesitation the whole domestic retinue passed into church before him, and he judged it best and wisest to follow quickly in silence, lest, when prayers began, his master should note his absence.

The building was very full,—and it was difficult to see where, if any strangers did arrive, they could be accommodated. Miss Eden, in her capacity as organist, was still playing the opening voluntary, but, despite the fact that there was no apparent disturbance of the usual order of things, there was a certain air of hushed expectancy among the people which was decidedly foreign to the normal atmosphere of St. Rest. The village lasses looked at each other's hats with keener interest,—the lads fidgeted with their ties and collars more strenuously, and secreted their caps more surreptitiously behind their legs,—and the most placid-looking personage in the whole congregation was Josey Letherbarrow, who, in a very clean smock, with a small red rose in his buttonhole, and his silvery hair parted on either side and just touching his shoulders, sat restfully in his own special corner not far from the pulpit, leaning on his stick and listening with rapt attention to the fall and flow of the organ music as it swept round him in soft and ever decreasing eddies of sound. The bells ceased, and eleven o'clock struck slowly from the church tower. At the last stroke, the Reverend John entered the chancel in his plain white surplice, spotless as new-fallen snow,—and as he knelt for a moment in silent devotion, the voluntary ended with a grave, long, sustained chord. A pause,—and then the 'Passon' rose, and faced his little flock, his hand laid on the open 'Book of Common Prayer.'

"When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive."

Walden's voice rang clear and sonorous,—the sunshine pouring through the plain glass of the high rose-window behind and above him, shed effulgence over the ancient sarcophagus in front of the altar and struck from its alabaster whiteness a

kind of double light which, circling round his tall slight figure made it stand out in singularly bold relief.

"If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

A ripple of gay laughter here echoed in through the church doors, which were left open for air on account of the great heat of the day. There was an uneasy movement in the congregation,—some men and women glanced at one another. That light, careless laughter was distinctly discordant. The Reverend John drew himself up a little more rigidly erect, and his face grew a shade paler. Steadily, he read on:—

"Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us in sundry places to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness; and that we should not dissemble nor cloke them before the face of Almighty God our Heavenly Father, but confess them with an humble, lowly, penitent and obedient heart——"

He ceased abruptly. A glimmer of colour,—a soft gliding swish of silken skirts, an affectation of tip-toe movement up the nave,—a wave of indescribable artificial perfume,—and then, a general stir and head-turning among the people showed that a new and unaccustomed element had suddenly merged into the simple human material whereof the village of St. Rest was composed,—an element altogether strange to it, not to say troublous and confusing. Walden saw, and bit his lips hard,—his hand instinctively clenched itself nervously on the 'Book of Common Prayer.' But his rigid attitude did not relax, and he remained mute, his eyes fixed steadily on the fashionably dressed new-comers, who, greatly embarrassed by the interruption their late entrance had caused,—an interruption emphasised in so marked a manner by the silence of the officiating minister, made haste to take the chairs pointed out to them by the verger, with crimsoning faces and lowered eyelids. It was a new and most unpleasant experience for them. They did not know, of course, that it was Walden's habit to pause in whatever part of the service he was reading if anyone came in late,—to wait

till the tardy arrivals took their places,—and then to begin the interrupted sentence over again,—a habit which had effectually succeeded in making all his parishioners punctual.

But Maryllia, whose guests they were,—Maryllia, who was responsible as their hostess for bringing them to church at all, and who herself, with Cicely, was the last to enter after service had begun, felt a rebellious wave of colour rushing up to her brows. It was very rude of Mr. Walden, she thought, to stop short in his reading and cause the whole congregation to turn and stare curiously at herself and her friends just because they were a little bit behind time! It exposed them all to public rebuke! And when the stir caused by their entrance had subsided, she stood up almost defiantly, lifting her graceful head haughtily, her soft cheeks glowing and her eyes flashing, looking twenty times prettier even than usual as she opened her daintily bound prayer-book with a careless, not to say indifferent air, as though her thoughts were thousands of miles away from St. Rest and all belonging to it. Glancing at the different members of her party, she was glad that one of them at least, Lady Eva Beaulyon, had secured a front seat, for her ladyship was never content unless she was well to the foremost of everything. She was a reigning beauty,—the darling of the society press, and the model of all aspiring photographers, —and she could hardly be expected to put up with any obscure corner, even in a church;—if she ever went to the Heaven of monkish legend, one could well imagine St. Peter standing aside for her to pass. Close beside her was another wonderful looking woman, a Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay, a 'leader' in society, who went everywhere, did everything, wore the newest coat, skirt or hat from Paris directly it was put on the market, and wrote accounts of herself and her 'smartness' to the American press under a 'nom-de-plume.' She was not, like Lady Beaulyon, celebrated for her beauty, but for her perennial youth. Her face, without being in the least interesting or charming, was smooth and peach-coloured, without a line of thought or a wrinkle of care upon it. Her eyes were bright and quite

baby-like in their meaningless expression, and her hair was of the loveliest Titian red. She had a figure which was the envy of all modellers of dress-stands,—and as she was wont to say of herself, it would have been difficult to find fault with the 'chic' of her outward appearance. Painters and sculptors would have found her an affront to nature—but then Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay had no acquaintance with painters and sculptors. She thought them 'queer' people, with very improper ideas. She was exceedingly put out by Walden's abrupt pause in his reading of the 'Dearly beloved,' while she and the other members of the Manor house-party rustled into their places,—and when he recommenced the exordium she revenged herself by staring at him quizzically through a long-handled tortoiseshell-mounted *lorgnon*. But she did not succeed in confusing him at all, or in even attracting his attention,—so she merely shrugged her shoulders, with what the French call an 'air moqueuse.'

The momentary confusion caused by the pause in the service soon passed, and the spirit of calm again settled on the scene after the 'General Confession.' But Maryllia was deeply conscious of hurt and vexation. It was too bad of Mr. Walden, she kept on saying to herself over and over again,—too bad! Her friends and herself were only five or six minutes late, and to have stopped in his reading of the service like that to put them all to shame was unkind—'yes, unkind,' she said in her vexed soul,—vexed, all the more because she was inwardly conscious that Walden was right and herself wrong. She knew well enough that she could have reached the church at eleven had she chosen, and have brought her friends punctual to time as well. She knew it was neither reverent nor respectful to interrupt divine worship. But she was too irritated to reason the matter out calmly just then,—all she could think of was that she and her London guests had received a reproof from the minister of the parish—silent, but none the less severe—before all the villagers—before her own servants—and on the first occasion of her coming to church, too! She could not get over it.

"If he can see me," she thought, "he will know that I am angry!"

Chafed little spirit!—as if it mattered to Walden whether she was angry or not! He saw her well enough,—he noted her face 'red as a rose,' with its mobile play of expression, set in its frame of golden-brown hair,—it flitted, sunbeam-like between his eyes and the 'Book of Common Prayer'—and, when he ceased reading, while the village choir, rendered slightly nervous by the presence of 'the quality,' chanted the 'O come let us sing unto the Lord,' he was conscious of a sudden lassitude, arising, as he knew, from the strain he had put upon himself for the past few minutes. He was, however, quite calm and self-possessed when he rose to read the Lessons of the Day, and the service proceeded as usual in the perfectly simple, unadorned style of 'that pure and reformed part of Christ's Holy Catholic Church which is established in this Realm.' Now and then his attention wandered—once or twice his eyes rested on the well-dressed group directly opposite to him with a kind of vague regret and doubt. There was an emotion working in his soul to which he could scarcely give a name. Instinctively he was conscious that a certain embarrassment and uneasiness affected the ordinary members of his congregation,—he knew that their minds were disquieted and distracted,—that the girls and women were open-eyed and almost open-mouthed at the sight of the fashionable costumes and wondrous millinery which the ladies of Miss Vancourt's house-party wore, and were dissatisfied with their own clothing in consequence,—and that the lads and men felt themselves to be awkward, uncouth and foolish in the near presence of personages belonging to quite another sphere than their own. He knew that the showy ephemera of this world had by a temporary fire-fly glitter, fascinated the simple souls that had been erstwhile glad to dwell for a space on the contemplation of spiritual and heavenly things. He saw that the matchless lesson of Christ's love to humanity was scarcely heeded in the contemplation of how very much humanity was able to do for itself even without Christ's love, provided it had money and the devil to 'push' it on! He

sighed a little;—and certain words in the letter of his friend Bishop Brent came back to his memory——"Many things seem to me hopeless,—utterly irremediable . . . I grow tired of my own puny efforts to lift the burden which is laid upon me." Then other, and stronger, thoughts came to him, and when the time arrived to read the Commandments, a rush of passion and vigorous intensity filled him with a force far greater than he knew. Cicely Bourne said afterwards that she should never forget the thrill that ran through her like a shock of electricity, when he proclaimed from the altar:—

"GOD spake these words and said: Thou shalt have none other gods but Me!"

Looking up at this moment, she saw Julian Adderley in the aisle on her left-hand side,—he too was staring at Walden as though he saw the figure of a saint in a vision. But Maryllia kept her face hidden, listening in a kind of awe, as each 'Commandment' was, as it seemed, grandly and strenuously insisted upon by the clear voice that had no tone of hypocrisy in its whole scale.

"Thou shalt NOT bear false witness against thy neighbour!"

Lady Beaulyon forgot to droop her head in the usual studied way which she knew was so becoming to her,—the NOT was so emphatic. An unpleasant shiver ran through her daintily-clothed person,—dear me!—how often and often she had 'borne false witness,' not only against her neighbour, but against everyone she could think of or talk about! Where could be the fun of living if you must NOT swear to as many lies about your neighbour as possible? No spice or savour would be left in the delicate ragoût of 'swagger' society! The minister of St. Rest was really quite objectionable,—a ranter,—a noisy, 'stagey' creature!—and both she and Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay murmured to each other that they did not like him.'

"So loud!" said Lady Beaulyon, breathing the words delicately against her friend's Titian-red hair.

"So provincial!" rejoined Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay, in the

same dulcet undertone, adding to her remark the fervent—"Lord have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep this law!"

One very gratifying circumstance to these ladies, however, and one that considerably astonished all the members of Miss Vancourt's house-party, as well as Miss Vancourt herself, was that no 'collection' was made. Neither the church, the poor, nor some distant mission to the heathen served as any excuse for begging, in the shrine of the 'Saint's Rest.' No vestige of a money-box or 'plate' was to be seen anywhere. And this fact pre-disposed them to survey Walden's face and figure with critical attention as he left the chancel and ascended the pulpit during the singing of 'The Lord is my Shepherd.' At the opening chords of that quaint and simple hymn, Cicely Bourne glanced at Miss Eden and Susie Prescott with a little suggestive smile, and caught their appealing glances,—then, as the quavering chorus of boys and girls began, she raised her voice as the 'leading soprano,' and like a thread of gold twined it round all the notes and tied them together in clear and lovely unison:

"The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want,
He maketh me down to lie,
In pleasant fields where the lilies grow,
And the river runneth by."

Everyone in the congregation stared and seemed stricken with sudden wonderment. Such singing they had never heard before. Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay put up her *lorgnon.*

"It's Maryllia Vancourt's creature,"—she whispered—"The ugly child she picked up in Paris. I suppose it really *is* a voice?"

"It really is, I think!" responded Lady Beaulyon, languidly, turning her fair head to look at the plain sallow girl with the untidy black hair whom she had only seen for a few minutes on her arrival at Abbot's Manor the previous day, and whom she had scarcely noticed. But Cicely saw her not—her whole soul was in her singing,—and she had no glance even

for Julian Adderley, who, gazing at her as if she were already the prima donna in an opera, listened enrapt.

"The Lord is my Shepherd; He feedeth me
In the depth of a desert land;
And, lest I should in the darkness slip,
He holdeth me by the hand."

Maryllia felt a contraction in her throat, and her eyes unconsciously filled with tears. How sweet that hymn was!—how very sweet! Tender memories of her father crowded upon her,—her mother's face, grown familiar to her sight from her daily visits to the now no longer veiled picture in the Manor gallery, shone out upon her from the altar like a glorified angel above the white sarcophagus where the word 'Resurget' sparkled jewel-like in the sunshine,—and she began to feel that after all there was something in the Christian faith that was divinely helpful and uplifting to the soul.

"The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want,
My mind on Him is stayed,
And though through the Valley of Death I walk,
I shall not be afraid!"

Pure and true rang Cicely's young, fresh and glorious voice, carrying all the voices of the children with it on the pulsating waves of the organ chords,—and an impression of high exaltation, serenity and peace, rested on the whole congregation with the singing of the last verse——

"The Lord is my Shepherd; O Shepherd sweet,
Leave me not here to stray;
But guide me safe to Thy heavenly fold,
And keep me there, I pray!
Amen!"

During the silence that immediately followed, Walden stood erect in the pulpit, looking down upon the people. He saw Maryllia's face,—he saw all the eyes of her London friends fixed on him with a more or less critical and supercilious stare,—he saw his own 'flock' waiting for his first word with

their usual air of respectful attention,—every small point and detail in his surroundings became suddenly magnified to his sight,—even the little rose in old Josey Letherbarrow's smock caught his eye with an almost obtrusive flare. The blithe soft carol of the birds outside sounded close and loud,—the buzzing of a bumble-bee that had found its way into the church and was now bouncing fussily against a sunlit window, in its efforts to pass through what seemed to itself clear space, made quite an abnormal noise. His heart beat heavily,—he fancied he could hear it thudding in his breast,—then, all at once, an inflow of energy rushed upon him as though the 'fiery tongues' of which Adam Frost had spoken, were in very truth descending upon him. Maryllia's face! There it was—so winsome, so bright, and proud and provocative in its every feature,—and the old French damask roses growing in her garden borders could not show a prettier colour than her cheeks! He lifted his hands. "Let us pray!"

The villagers all obediently dropped on their knees. The Manor 'house-party' politely bent their heads.

"Supreme Creator of the Universe, without Whose power and permission no thought is ever generated in the brain of Thy creature, man; Be pleased to teach me, Thy unworthy servant, Thy will and law this day, that I may speak to this congregation even as Thou shalt command, without any care for myself or my words, but in entire submission to Thee and Thy Holy Spirit! Amen."

He rose. The congregation rose with him. Some of the village folks exchanged uneasy glances with one another. Was their beloved 'Passon' quite himself? He looked so very pale,—his eyes were so unusually bright,—and his whole aspect so more than commonly commanding. Almost nervously they fumbled with their Bibles as he gave out the text:—"The twenty-sixth verse of the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew."

He paused, and then, as was his usual custom, patiently repeated—"The sixteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, twenty-sixth verse." Again he waited, while

the subdued rustling of pages and turning over of books continued,—and finally pronounced the words—"What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Here he closed the Testament, leaning one hand upon it. He had resolved to speak 'extempore,' just as the mood moved him, and to make his discourse as brief as possible,—a mere twelve minutes' sermon. For he knew that his ordinary congregation were more affected by a sense of restlessness and impatience than they themselves realised, and that such strangers as were present were of a temperament more likely to be bored, than interested.

"What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"—he began, slowly, and with emphasis, his eyes resting steadfastly on the fashionably-attired group of persons immediately under his observation—"This was one of the questions put by the Divine Man Christ, to men,—and was no doubt considered then, as it surely is considered now, a very foolish enquiry. For to 'gain the whole world' is judged as so exceedingly profitable to most people that they are quite willing to lose everything else they have in exchange for it. They will gladly barter conscience, principle, honour and truth to gain 'the whole world'—and as for the 'soul,'—that fine and immortal essence is treated by the majority as a mere poetic phrase—a figure of speech, without any real meaning behind it. I know well how some of you here to-day will regret wasting your time in listening, even for a few minutes, to anything about so obsolete a subject as the Soul! The Soul! What is it? A fiction or a fact? How many of us possess a Soul, or *think* we possess one? Of what is it composed, that it should be judged as so much more precious than the Body?—the dear Body, which we pamper and feed and clothe and cosset and cocker, till it struts on the face of the planet, a mere magnified Ape of conceit and trickery, sloth and sensuality, the one unforgivable anachronism in an otherwise perfect Creation! For Body without Soul is a blot on the Universe,—a distortion and abomination of nature, with which nature by and by will have nothing to do. Yet I

freely grant that while Soul animates and inspires all creation, man cannot or will not comprehend it; he may, therefore, in part, be condoned for not endeavouring to 'save' what he is not taught to truly recognise. To explain the 'Soul' more clearly, I will refer you all to the Book of Genesis, where it is written—'And God made man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became *a living Soul.*' Thus we see that 'Soul' is the breath of God, which is also the Eternal breath of Eternal Life. Each human being is endowed with this essence of immortality, which cannot die with death, being, as it is, the embryo of endless lives to come. This is why it is pre-eminently valuable—this is why we should take heed that it be not 'lost.' It may be argued—'How can anything be lost which is eternally alive?' That proposition is easily answered. A jewel may be 'lost' in the sea, but it is still existent as a jewel. In the same way a man may 'lose' his Soul, though he can never destroy it. It is the 'breath of God'—the germ of immortal Life,—and if one 'loses' it, another may find it. This is not only religion,—it is also science. In the present age, when all imagination, all poetry, all instinctive sense of the divine, are being subordinated to what we consider as Fact, there is one supreme mystery which eludes the research of the most acute and pitiless materialist—and that is life itself,—its origin, its evolution and its intention. We can do many wonderful things,—but we cannot re-animate the corpse of a friend! Christ could do this, being Divinity incarnate,—but we can only wring our hands helplessly, and wonder where the spirit has fled,—that spirit which made our beloved one speak to us, smile, and exchange the looks which express the emotions of the heart more truly than words. We want the 'Soul' we loved! The inanimate clay, stretched cold in its coffined rest, is a strange sight to us. We do not know it. It is not our friend! Our friend was the 'Soul' that lived in the clay,—the 'breath of God' that moved our own 'Soul' to respond to it in affection and tenderness. And we instinctively know and feel that though this 'breath of God' is gone from us,

it cannot be dead. And 'lost' is not an expression that we would ever apply to it, because we hope and believe it is 'found'—found by its Creator, and taught to realise and rejoice in its own immortality. All religion means this,—the 'finding' of the Soul. The passion of our Saviour teaches this,—His resurrection, His ascension into Heaven, symbolise and express the same thing. Yet, in the words of Christ Himself, it would nevertheless seem that the 'Soul' divinely generated and immortal as it is, can be 'lost' by our own act and will. 'What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' I venture to think the text implies, that in the very attempt to 'gain the whole world,' the loss of the soul is involved. I am not going to detain you here this morning with a long exordium concerning how some of you can and may, if you choose, play havoc with the priceless gift God has bestowed upon each one of you. I only desire to impress upon you all, with the utmost earnestness, that it is idle to say among yourselves 'We have no souls,' or 'The soul is an unknown quantity and cannot be proved.' The soul is as real and actual a part of you as the main artery is of the body,—and that you cannot see it, touch it, or put it under the surgeon's dissecting knife is no proof that it is not there. You might as well say life itself does not exist, because you cannot see its primæval causes or beginnings. The Soul is the centre of your being,—the compass of your life-journey,—the pivot round which, whether you will or not, you shape your actions in this world for the next. If you lose that mainspring of motive, you lose all. Your conduct, your speech, your expression in every movement and feature all show the ungoverned and ungovernable condition in which you are. God is not mocked,—and in many cases,—taking the grand majority of the human race,—neither is man!"

He paused. The congregation was very quiet. He felt, rather than saw, that Maryllia's eyes were fixed upon him,—and he was perfectly aware that Lady Beaulyon,—whom he recognised, as he would have recognised an actress, on account

of the innumerable photographs of her which were on sale in the windows of every stationer in every moderate-sized town,—was gazing straight up at him with a bright, mocking glance in which lurked a suspicion of disdain and laughter. Moved by a sudden impulse, he bent his own regard straight down upon her with an inflexible cool serenity. An ugly frown puckered her ladyship's brow at once,—and she lowered her eyelids angrily.

"I say God is not mocked,"—he continued slowly; "Neither is man! The miserable human being that has 'lost' his or her Soul, may be assured that the 'gain' of the whole world in exchange, will prove but Dead Sea fruit, bitter and tasteless, and in the end wholly poisonous. Loss of the Soul is marked by moral degradation and deterioration,—and this inward crumbling and rotting of all noble and fine feeling into baseness, shows itself on the fairest face,—the proudest form. The man who lies against his neighbour for the sake of worldly convenience or personal revenge, writes the lie in his own countenance as he utters it. It engraves its mark,—it can be seen by all who read physiognomy—it says plainly—'Let not this man be trusted!' The woman who is false and treacherous carries the stigma on her features, be they never so perfect. The creature of clay who has lost Soul, likewise lacks Heart,—and the starved, hopeless poverty of such an one is disclosed in him, even if he be a world's millionaire. Moreover, 'Soul'—that delicate, divine, eternal essence, is easily lost. Any earthly passion carried to excess, will overwhelm it, and sink it in an unfathomable sea. It can slip away in the pursuit of ambition,—in schemes for self-aggrandisement,—in the building up of huge fortunes,—in the pomp, and show, and vanity of mundane things. It flies from selfishness and sensuality. It can be lost in hate,—it can equally be lost in love!"

Again he paused—then went on—"Yes—for even in love, that purest and most elevating of human emotions, the Soul must have its way rather than the Body. Loss of the 'Soul' in love, means that love then becomes the mere corpse of itself,

and must needs decay with all other such dust-like things. In every sentiment, in every thought, in every hope, in every action, let us find the 'Soul,' and never let it go! For without it, no great deed can be done, no worthy task accomplished, no life lived honourably and straightly in the sight of God. It shall profit us nothing to be famous, witty, wealthy, or admired, if we are mere stuffed figures of clay without the 'breath of God' as our animating life principle. The simple peasant, who has enough 'Soul' in him to reverently watch the sunset across the hills, and think of God as the author of all that splendour, is higher in the spiritual scale than the learned scholar who is too occupied with himself and his own small matters to notice whether it is a sunset or a house on fire. The 'Soul' in a man should be his sense, his sight, his touch, his very inmost and dearest centre,—the germ of all good,—the generator of all peace and hope and happiness. It is the one and only thing to foster,—the one and only thing to save,—the only part of man which, belonging as it does to God, God will require again. Some of you here present to-day will perhaps think for a little while on what I have said when you leave this church,—and others will at once forget it,—but think, forget, or remember as you choose, the truth remains, that all of you, young and old, rich and poor, are endowed in your own selves with the 'making of an angel.' The 'Soul' within you, which you may elect to keep or to lose, is the infant of Heaven. It depends on you for care,—for sustenance;—it needs all your work and will to aid it in growing up to its full stature and perfection. It shall profit you nothing if you gain the whole world, and at death have naught to give to your Maker but crumbling clay. Let the Angel be ready,—the 'Soul' in you prepared, and full-winged for flight! According to the power and purity with which you have invested and surrounded it, will be its fate. If you have voluntarily checked and stunted its aspirations, even so checked and stunted must be its next probation,—but if you have faithfully done your best to nourish it with loving thoughts and

noble aims,—if you have given it room to expand and shine forth with all its own original God-born radiance, then will its ascension to a higher sphere of action and attainment be attended with unimaginable joy and glory. Let the world go, rather than lose the Divine Light within you! For that Light will, and must, attract all that is worth knowing, worth loving and worth keeping in our actual environment. The rest can be well spared,—whether it be money, position, notoriety or social influence,—for none of these things last,—none of them are in any way precious, save to such ignorant and misguided persons as are deceived by external shows. The Soul is all! Keep but that 'breath of God' within you, and the world becomes merely one step of the ladder on which you may easily mount through everlasting love upon love, joy upon joy, to the utmost height of Heaven!"

He ceased. For a moment there was a profound stillness. And then, with the usual formula—"Now to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost be praise, honour and glory for ever and ever"—the congregation stood up. Lady Beaulyon shook her silken skirts delicately. Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay put her hand to her back hair coil and made sure that it was safe. And there was a general stir and movement, which instantly subsided again, as the people knelt to receive the parting benediction. Maryllia's eyes were riveted on Walden as he stretched out his hands;—she was conscious of a certain vague awe and reverence for this man with whom she had so casually walked and talked, only as it seemed the other day;—he appeared, as it were, removed from her by an immeasurable distance,—his spirit and hers had gone wide apart,—his was throned upon a height of noble ideals,—hers was low, low down in a little valley of worldly nothings,—and oh, how small and insignificant she felt! Cicely's hand caught hers and gave it an affectionate little pressure, as they bowed their heads together under the solemnly pronounced blessing.

"The peace of God which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord,"——here Walden

turned ever so slightly towards the place where Maryllia knelt; "and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, be amongst you and remain with you always!"

"A——men!"

With this last response from the choir, the congregation began to disperse, and Walden, glancing over the little moving crowd, saw the eager bustle and pressure of all its units to look at 'the ladies from the Manor' and take stock of their wonderful costumes. The grip of 'the world' was on them, and the only worshipper remaining quietly in his place, with hands clasped across his stick, and eyes closed, was Josey Letherbarrow. The old man seemed to be praying inwardly—his face was rapt and serene. Walden looked down upon him very tenderly. A verse of Browning's ran through his mind:—

"Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was made.
Our times are in His hand,
Who saith: 'A whole I planned,'
Youth shows but half; trust God; see all, nor be afraid!"

And musing on this, he descended slowly from the pulpit and retired.

CHAPTER XIX

OUTSIDE in the churchyard, there was a general little flutter of local excitement. Maryllia lingered there for several minutes, pointing out the various beauties in the architecture of the church to her guests, not that these individuals were very much interested in such matters, for they were of that particular social type which considers that the highest form of good breeding is to show a polite nullity of feeling concerning everything and everybody. They were eminently 'cultured,' which nowadays means pre-eminently dull. Had they been asked, they would have said that it is dangerous to express any opinion on any subject,—even on the architecture of a church. Because the architect himself might be somewhere near,—or the architect's father, or his mother or his great-grandam—one never knows! And by a hasty remark in the wrong place and at the wrong moment, one might make an unnecessary enemy. It is so much nicer—so much safer to say nothing at all! Of course they looked at the church,—it would have been uncivil to their hostess not to look at it, as she was taking the trouble to call their attention to its various points, and they assumed the usual conventional air of appreciative admiration. But none of them understood anything about it,—and none of them cared to understand. They had not even noticed the ancient sarcophagus in front of the altar except as 'some odd kind of sculptured ornament.' When they were told what it was, they smiled vacuously, and said: 'How curious!' But further than this mild and non-aggressive exclamation they did

not venture. The villagers hung about shyly, loth to lose sight of the 'quality';—two or three 'county' people lingered also, to stare at, and comment upon, the notorious 'beauty,' Lady Beaulyon, whose physical charms, having been freely advertised for some years in the society columns of the press, were naturally 'on show' for the criticism of Tom, Dick and Harry, —Mrs. Mandeville Poreham, marshalling her five marriageable daughters together, stalked magisterially to her private 'bus, very much *en évidence*, and considerably put out by the supercilious gaze and smile of the perfectly costumed Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay,—Julian Adderley, coming up in response to the beckoning finger of Cicely Bourne, was kindly greeted by Maryllia, introduced to one or two of her friends, and asked then and there to luncheon, an invitation he accepted with alacrity, and, after this, all the Manor party started with their hostess to walk home, leaving the village and villagers behind them, and discussing as they went, the morning's service and sermon in the usual brief and desultory style common to fashionable church-goers. The principal impression they appeared to have on their minds was one of vague amusement. The notion that any clergyman should have the 'impudence' —(this was the word used by Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay)—to pause in the service because people came in late, touched the very apex of absurdity.

"So against his own interests too,"—said Lady Beaulyon, carelessly—"Because where would all the parsons be if they offended their patrons?"

Mr. Bludlip Courtenay, a thin gentleman with a monocle —assented to this proposition with a "Where indeed!" He considered that clergymen should not forget themselves,—they should show proper respect towards those on whom they depended for support.

"Mr. Walden depends on God for support, I believe,"—said Cicely Bourne suddenly.

Mr. Bludlip Courtenay fixed his monocle firmly in his left eye and stared at her.

"Really!" he drawled dubiously—"You surprise me!"

"It *is* funny, isn't it?" pursued Cicely—"So unlike the Apostles!"

Maryllia smiled. Lady Beaulyon laughed outright.

"Are you trying to be satirical, you droll child?" she enquired languidly.

"Oh no, I'm not trying,"—replied Cicely, with a quick flash of her dark eyes—"It comes quite easy! You were talking about clergymen offending their patrons. Now Mr. Walden hasn't got any patron to offend. He's his own patron."

"Has he purchased the advowson, then?" enquired Mr. Courtenay—"Or, to put it more conventionally, has he obtained it through a friend at court?"

"I don't know anything about the how or the why or the when,"—said Cicely—"But I know he owns the living and the church. So of course if he chooses to show people what he thinks of them when they come in to service late, he can do it. If they don't like it, he doesn't care. He doesn't ask anybody for anything,—he doesn't even send round a collection plate."

"No—*I* noticed that!—awfully jolly!"—said a good-natured looking man who had been walking beside Julian Adderley,—a certain Lord Charlemont whose one joy in life was motoring—"Awfully game! Ought to make him quite famous!"

"It ought,—it ought indeed!" agreed Adderley—"I do not suppose there is another clergyman in England who obliterates the plate from the worship of the Almighty! It is so remote—so very remote!"

"I think he's a funny sort of parson altogether,"—said Cicely meditatively—"He doesn't beg, borrow or steal,—he isn't a toady, he isn't a hypocrite, and he speaks his mind. Queer, isn't it?"

"Very!" laughed Lord Charlemont—"I don't know another like him, give you my word!"

"Well, he can't preach,"—said Lady Beaulyon, decisively—"I never heard quite such a stupid sermon."

All the members of the house-party glanced at one another

to see if this verdict were generally endorsed. Apparently some differed in opinion.

"Didn't you like it, Eva?" asked Maryllia.

"My dear child! Who *could* like it! Such transcendental stuff! And all that nonsense about the Soul! In these scientific days too!"

"Ah science, science!" sighed Mr. Bludlip Courtenay, dropping his monocle with a sharp click against his top waistcoat button—"Where will it end?"

Nobody volunteered a reply to this profound proposition.

"'Souls' are noted for something else than being saved for heaven nowadays, aren't they, Lady Beaulyon?" queried Lord Charlemont, with a knowing smile.

Lady Beaulyon's small, rather hard mouth tightened into a thin line.

"I really don't know!"—she said carelessly—"If you mean the social 'Souls,' they are rather unconventional certainly, and not always discreet. But they are generally interesting—much more so, I should think than such 'Souls' as the parson preached about just now."

"Indeed, yes!" agreed Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay—"I can imagine nothing more tiresome than to be a Soul without a Body, climbing from height to height of a heaven where there is no night, no sleep, no rest for ever and ever. Simply dreadful! But there!—one only goes to church for form's sake—just as an example to one's servants—and when it's done, don't you think it's best to forget it as soon as possible?"

She raised her baby eyes appealingly as she put the question.

Everybody laughed, or rather sniggered. Real honest laughter is not considered 'good form' by certain sections of society. A gentle imitation of the nanny-goat's bleat is the most seemly way for cultured persons to give vent to the expression of mirth. Maryllia alone was grave and preoccupied. The conversation of her guests annoyed her, though in London she had been quite well accustomed to hear people talk lightly

and callously of religion and all religious subjects. Yet here, in the quiet country, things were different, somehow. God seemed nearer,—it was more difficult to blaspheme and ignore Him. And there was a greater sense of regret and humiliation in one's self for one's own lack of faith. Though, at the same time, it has to be reluctantly conceded that in no quarter of the world is religious hypocrisy and sham so openly manifested as in the English provinces, and especially in the small towns, where, notwithstanding the fact that all the Sundays are passed in persistent church and chapel going, the result of this strenuous sham piety is seen in the most unchristian back-biting and mischief-making on every week-day.

But St. Rest was not a town. It was a tiny village apart,—utterly free from the petty pretensions of its nearest neighbour, Riversford, which considered itself almost 'metropolitan' on account of its modern red-brick and stucco villas into which its tradespeople 'retired' as soon as they had made enough money to be able to pretend that they had never stood behind a counter in their lives. St. Rest, on the contrary, was simple in its tastes,—so simple as to be almost primitive, particularly in its religious sentiments, which the ministry of John Walden had, so far, kept faithful and pure. Its atmosphere was therefore utterly at variance with the cheap atheism of the modern world, and it was this discordancy which struck so sharply on Maryllia's emotional nature and gave her such a sense of unaccustomed pain.

At the Manor there were a few other visitors who had not attended church,—none of them important, except to themselves and the society paragraphist,—none of them distinguished as ever having done anything particularly good, or useful in the world,—and none of them possessing any very unconventional characteristics, with the exception of two very quaint old ladies, who were known somewhat irreverently among their acquaintances as the 'Sisters Gemini.' They were of good birth and connection, but, being cast adrift as wrecks on the shores of Time,—the one as a widow, the other as a spinster, —had sworn eternal friendship on the altars of their several

disillusioned and immolated affections. In the present day we are not overtroubled by any scruples of reverence for either old widowhood or old spinsterhood; and the 'Sisters Gemini' had become a standing joke with the self-styled 'wise and witty' of London restaurants and late suppers. Lady Wicketts and Miss Fosby were their actual names, and they were happily unconscious of the unfeeling sobriquet bestowed upon them when they were out of hearing. Lady Wicketts had once been a reigning 'beauty,' and she lived on the reputation of that glorious past. Miss Fosby aided and abetted her in this harmless self-deception. Lady Wicketts had been painted by all the famous artists of her era, from the time of her seventeeth birthday to her thirtieth. She had been represented as a 'Shepherdess,' a 'Madonna,' a 'Girl with Lilies,' a 'Lady with a Greyhound,' a 'Nymph Sleeping,' and more briefly and to the purpose, as 'Portrait of Lady Wicketts,' in every exhibition of pictures that had been held during her youth and prime. Miss Fosby carried prints and photographs of these works of art everywhere about with her. She would surprise people by casually taking one of them out of her album and saying softly—"Isn't that beautiful?"

And then, if the beholders fell into the trap and uttered exclamations of rapture at the 'Shepherdess' or the 'Madonna,' or whatever allegorical subject it happened to be, she would smile triumphantly and say—'Lady Wicketts!'—to all appearance enjoying the violent shock of incredulous amazement which her announcement invariably inflicted on all those who received it.

"Not possible!" they would murmur—"Lady Wicketts——!"

"Yes,—Lady Wicketts when she was young,"—Miss Fosby would say mildly—"She was very beautiful when she was twenty. She is sixty-seven now. But she is still beautiful,—don't you think so? She has such an angelic expression! And she is so good—ah!—so very good! There is no one like Lady Wicketts!"

All this was very sweet and touching on the part of Miss Fosby, so far as Miss Fosby alone was concerned. To her there was but one woman in the world, and that was Lady Wicketts. But the majority of people saw Lady Wicketts in quite another light. They knew she had been, in her time, as unprincipled as beautiful, and that she had 'gone the pace' more openly than most of her class. They beheld her now without spectacles,—an enormously fat woman, with a large round flaccid face, scarred all over by Time's ploughshare with such deep furrows that one might have sown seed in them and expected it to grow.

But Miss Fosby still recognised the 'Shepherdess,' the 'Madonna' and the 'Girl with Lilies,' in the decaying composition of her friend, and Miss Fosby was something of a bore in consequence, though the constancy of her devotion to a totally unworthy object was quaintly pathetic in its way. The poor soul herself was nearer seventy than sixty, and she was quite as lean as her idol was fat,—she had never been loved by anyone in all her life, but,—in her palmy days,—she had loved. And the necessity of loving had apparently remained a part of her nature, otherwise it would have been a sheer impossibility for her to have selected so strange a fetish as Lady Wicketts for her adoration. Lady Wicketts did not, in any marked way, respond to Miss Fosby's tenderness,—she merely allowed herself to be worshipped, just as in her youth she had allowed scores of young bloods to kiss her hand and murmur soft nothings in her then 'shell-like' ear. The young bloods were gone, but Miss Fosby remained. Better the worship of Miss Fosby than no worship at all. Maryllia had met these two old ladies frequently at various Continental resorts, when she had travelled about with her aunt,—and she had found something amusing and interesting in them both, especially in Miss Fosby, who was really a good creature,—and when in consultation with Cicely as to who, among the various people she knew, should be asked down to the Manor and who should not, she had selected them as a set-off to the younger, more flippant and casual of her list, and also because

they were likely to be convenient personages to play chaperones if necessary.

For the rest, the people were of the usual type one has got accustomed to in what is termed 'smart' society nowadays,—listless, lazy, more or less hypocritical and malicious,—apathetic and indifferent to most things and most persons, save and except those with whom unsavoury intrigues might or would be possible,—sneering and salacious in conversation, bitter and carping of criticism, generally *blasé*, and suffering from the incurable *ennui* of utter selfishness,—the men concentrating their thoughts chiefly on racing, gaming, and Other Men's Wives,—the women dividing all their stock of emotions between Bridge, Dress, and Other Women's Husbands. And when Julian Adderley, as an author in embryo, found himself seated at luncheon with this particular set of persons, all of whom were more or less well known in the small orbit wherein they moved, he felt considerably enlivened and exhilarated. Life was worth living, he said to himself, when one might study at leisure the little tell-tale lines of vice and animalism on the exquisite features of Lady Beaulyon, and at the same time note admiringly how completely the united forces of massage and self-complacency had eradicated every wrinkle from the expressionless countenance of Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay. These two women were, in a way, notorious as 'leaders' of their own special coteries of social scandalmongers and political brokers; Lady Beaulyon was known best among Jew financiers; Mrs. Courtenay among American 'Kings' of oil and steel. Each was in her own line a 'power,'—each could coax large advances of money out of the pockets of millionaires to further certain 'schemes' which were vaguely talked about, but which never came to fruition,—each had a little bevy of young journalists in attendance,—press boys whom they petted and flattered, and persuaded to write paragraphs concerning their wit, wisdom and beauty, and how they 'looked radiant in pink' or 'dazzling in pea green.' Contemplating first one and then the other of these ladies, Julian almost resolved to compose a poem about them, entitled 'The Sirens,' and, dividing it into Two

Cantos, to dedicate the First Canto to Lady Beaulyon and the Second to Mrs. Courtenay.

"It would be so new—so fresh!" he mused, with a bland anticipation of the flutter such a work might possibly cause among society dove-cots—"And if *all* the truth were told, so much more *risqué* than 'Don Juan'!"

Glancing up and down, and across the hospitable board, exquisitely arranged with the loveliest flowers and fruit, and the most priceless old silver, he noticed that every woman of the party was painted and powdered except Maryllia, and her young protégée, Cicely. The dining-room of Abbot's Manor was not a light apartment,—its oak-panelled walls and raftered ceiling created shadow rather than luminance,—and though the windows were large and lofty, rising from the floor to the cornice, their topmost panes were of very old stained glass, so that the brightest sunshine only filtered, as it were, through the deeply-encrusted hues of rose and amber and amethyst squares, painted with the arms of the Vancourts, and heraldic emblems of bygone days. Grateful and beautiful indeed was this mysteriously softened light to the ladies round the table,—and for a brief space they almost *loved* Maryllia. For *her* face was flushed, and quite uncooled by powder—'like a dairy-maid's—she will get so coarse if she lives in the country always!' Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay confided softly to Lord Charlemont, who vaguely murmured—'Ah! Yes! I daresay!' quite without any idea of what the woman was talking about. Maryllia's pretty hair too was ruffled, she having merely taken off her hat in the hall on her return from church, without troubling to go up to her room and 'touch up' her appearance as all the other ladies who had suffered from walking exercise had done,—and her eyes looked just a trifle tired. Adderley found her charming with this shade of fatigue and listlessness upon her,—more charming than in her most radiant phases of vivacity. Her peach-like skin, warmed as it was by the sun, was tinted with Nature's own exquisite colouring, and compared most favourably with the cosmetic art so freely displayed by her female friends on either side of her. Julian began to con

verses in his head, and he recalled the lines of seventeenth-century Richard Crashaw:—

"A Face that's best
By its own beauty drest,
And can alone command the rest."

And he caught himself wondering why,—whenever he came near the Lady of the Manor,—he was anxious to seem less artificial, less affected, and more of a man than his particular 'Omar Kayyám' set had taught him to be. The same praiseworthy desire moved him in the company of John Walden, therefore sex could have nothing to do with it. Was it 'Soul'?—that 'breath of God' which had been spoken of in the pulpit that morning?

He could not, however, dwell upon this rather serious proposition at luncheon, his thoughts being distracted by the conversation, if conversation it could be called, that was buzzing on either side of the table, amidst the clattering of plates and the popping of champagne corks. It was neither brilliant, witty nor impersonal,—brilliant, witty and impersonal talk is never generated in modern society nowadays. "I would much rather listen to the conversation of lunatics in the common room of an asylum, than to the inane gabble of modern society in a modern drawing-room"—said a late distinguished politician to the present writer—"For the lunatics always have the glimmering of an idea somewhere in their troubled brains, but modern society has neither brains nor ideas." Fragmentary sentences, often slangy, and occasionally ungrammatical, seemed most in favour with the Manor 'house-party,'—and for a time splinters of language flew about like the chips from dry timber under a woodman's axe, without shape, or use, or meaning. It was a mere confused and senseless jabber—a jabber in which Maryllia took no part. She sat very quietly looking from one face to the other at table with a critical interest. These were the people she had met every day more or less in London,—some of them had visited her aunt constantly, and had invited her out to dinners and luncheons, 'at homes,' balls and race

parties, and all were considered to be 'very select' in every form that is commended by an up-to-date civilisation. Down here, in the stately old-world surroundings of Abbot's Manor, they looked very strange to her,—nay, even more than strange. Clowns, columbines and harlequins with all their 'make-up' on, could not have seemed more out of place than these socially popular persons in the historic house of her ancestors. Lady Beaulyon was perhaps the most remarkable 'revelation' of the whole company. Maryllia had always admired Eva Beaulyon with quite an extravagant admiration, on account of her physical charm and grace,—and had also liked her sufficiently well to entirely discredit the stories that were rife about the number of her unlawful *amours*. That she was an open flirt could not be denied,—but that she ever carried a flirtation beyond bounds, Maryllia would never have believed. Now, however, a new light seemed thrown upon her—there was a touch of something base in her beauty—a flash of cruelty in her smile—a hardness in her eyes. Maryllia looked at her wistfully now and then, and was half sorry she had invited her, the disillusion was so complete.

The luncheon went on, and was soon over, and coffee and cigarettes were served. All the women smoked with the exception of Maryllia, Cicely and old Miss Fosby. The rings of pale blue vapour circled before Maryllia's eyes in a dim cloud,—she had seen the same kind of mixed smoking going on before, scores of times, and yet now—why was it that she felt vaguely annoyed by a sense of discrepancy and vulgarity? She could not tell. Cicely watched her lovingly,—and every now and again Julian Adderley, waving away the smoke of his own cigar with one hand, studied her face and tried to fathom its expression. She spoke but little, and that chiefly to Lord Charlemont who was on her left-hand side.

"And how long are you going to stay in this jolly old place, Miss Vancourt?" he asked.

"All my life, I hope,"—she said with a little smile—"It is my own home, you know."

"Oh yes!—I know!—but—" he hesitated for a moment; "But your aunt——"

"Aunt Emily and I don't quite agree,"—said Maryllia, quietly—"She has been very kind to me in the past,—but since Uncle Fred's death, things have not been just as pleasant. You see, I speak frankly. Besides I'm getting on towards thirty,—it's time I lived my own life, and tried to do something useful."

Charlemont laughed.

"You look more like eighteen than thirty,"—he said—"Why give yourself away?"

"Is that giving myself away?" and she raised her eyebrows quizzically—"I'm not thirty yet—I'm twenty-seven,—but that's old enough to begin to take things seriously. I've made up my mind to live here at Abbot's Manor and do all I can for the tenantry and the village generally—I'm sure I shall be perfectly happy."

"How about getting married?" he queried.

Her blue eyes darkened with a shade of offence.

"The old story!" she said—"Men always think a woman must be married to be happy. It doesn't at all follow. I know heaps and heaps of married women, and they are in anything but an enviable state. I would not change with one of them!"

"Would you like to be another Miss Fosby?" he suggested in a mirthful undertone.

She smiled.

"Well—no! But I would rather be Miss Fosby than Lady Wicketts!"

Here she rose, giving the signal for general adjournment to the drawing-room. The windows of this apartment were set open, and a charming garden vista of lawn and terrace and rose-walk opened out before the eyes.

"Now for Bridge!" said Lady Beaulyon—"I'm simply dying for a game!"

"So am I!" declared Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay—"Lord Charlemont, you'll play?"

"Charmed, I'm sure!" was the ready response. "Where shall we put the card tables? Near the window? Such an enjoyable prospect!"

"We'll have two tables, or even three,"—said Lady Beaulyon; "I suppose most of us will play?"

"Oh yes!" "Why of course!" "I should think so!" "Just what we're all longing for!" Such were the expressions of general delight and acceptance chorussed by the whole party.

"You'll join, Lady Wicketts?"

"With pleasure!" and Lady Wicketts' sunken old eyes gleamed with an anxious light over the furrows of flesh which encircled them, as she promptly deserted Miss Fosby, who had been sitting next to her, for the purpose of livelier entertainment;—and in a moment there was a general gathering together in the wide embrasure of the window nook, and an animated discussion as to who should play Bridge and who should not. Maryllia watched the group silently. There were varying shades of expression on her mobile features. She held Cicely's hand in her own,—and was listening to some of Adderley's observations on quite ordinary topics, when suddenly, with an impulsive movement, she let Cicely go, and with an 'Excuse me!' to Julian, went towards her guests. She had made a resolve;—it would be an attempt to swim against the social current, and it was fraught with difficulty and unpleasantness,—yet she was determined to do it. "If I am a coward now," she thought—"I shall never be brave!" Her heart beat uncomfortably, and she could feel the blood throbbing nervously in her veins, as she bent her mind to the attitude she was about to take up, regardless of mockery or censure. Scraps of the window conversation fell on her ears—"I won forty pounds last Wednesday,—it just paid my boot-bill!" said one young woman, laughing carelessly.

"Luckier than me!" retorted a man next to her—"I had to pay a girl's losses to the tune of a hundred. It's all right though!" And he grinned suggestively.

"Is she pretty?"

"Ripping!"

"I want to make up five hundred pounds this week," observed Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay, in the most serious and

matter-of-fact way—"I've won it all but a hundred and fifty."

"Good for you!"

"Rather!" said Lord Charlemont, nodding approval—"I'd like to get you for a partner!"

"I *am* considered lucky,"—smiled Mrs. Courtenay, with an air of virtuous pride—"I always win *something*!"

"Well, let's begin at once,—we'll play all the afternoon," said Lady Beaulyon.

"Where are the tables?" "*And* the cards?"

"Ask Maryllia——"

But at that moment Maryllia stepped gently into their midst, her eyes shining, her face very pale.

"Not on Sunday, please!" she said.

A stillness fell upon them all. They gazed upon each other in sheer stupefaction. Lady Beaulyon smiled disdainfully.

"Not on Sunday? What are you talking about, Maryllia? Not *what* on Sunday?"

"Not Bridge,"—replied Maryllia, in her clear soft voice—"I do not allow it."

Fresh glances of wonderment were exchanged. The men hummed and hawed, and turned themselves about on their heels—the women simply stared. Lady Beaulyon burst out laughing.

"Ridiculous!" she exclaimed,—then flushed, and bit her lip, knowing that such an ejaculation was scarcely civil to her hostess. But Maryllia took no offence.

"Pray do not think me discourteous,"—she said, very sweetly; "I would not interfere with your pleasure in any way if I could possibly help it. But in this instance I really must do so."

"Oh certainly, Miss Vancourt!" "We would not think of playing if you do not wish it!" These, and similar expressions came from Lord Charlemont, and one or two others.

"My dear Maryllia," said Mrs Courtenay, reproachfully—"You are really *very* odd! I have myself seen you playing Bridge, Sunday after Sunday at your aunt's house in London.

Why should you now suddenly object to your friends doing what you have so often done yourself?"

Maryllia flushed a pretty rose-red.

"In my aunt's house I had to do as my aunt wished, Mrs. Courtenay," she said—"In my own house I do as *I* wish!"

Here her face relaxed into a bright smile, as she raised her candid blue eyes to the men standing about her—"I'm sure you won't mind amusing yourselves with something else than cards, just for one day, will you? Come into the garden,—it's such a perfect afternoon! The rose-walk just opposite leads down to the bank of the river,—would some of you like to go on the water? There are two boats ready there if you would. And do forgive me for stopping your intended game!—you can play Bridge every day in the week if you like, but spare the Sunday!"

There was a brief awkward pause. Then Eva Beaulyon turned her back indifferently on the whole party and stepped out on the lawn. She was followed by Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay, and both ladies gave vent to small smothered bleats of mocking laughter as they sauntered across the grass side by side. But Maryllia did not care. She had carried her point, and was satisfied. The Sunday's observance in Abbot's Manor, always rigorously insisted upon by her father, would not be desecrated by card-playing and gambling under his daughter's sway. That was enough for her. A serene content dwelt in her eyes as she watched her guests disperse and scatter themselves in sections of twos and threes all over the garden and grounds—and she said the pleasantest and kindest things when any of them passed her on their way, telling them just where to find the prettiest nooks, and where to pick the choicest fruit and flowers. Lord Charlemont watched her with a sense of admiration for her 'pluck.'

"By Jove!" he thought—"I'd rather have fronted the guns in a pitched battle than have forbidden my own guests to play Bridge on Sunday! Wants nerve,—upon my soul it does!—and the little woman's got it—you bet she has!" Aloud he said—

"I'm awfully glad to be let off Bridge, Miss Vancourt! A day's respite is a positive boon!"

"Do you play it so often, then?" she asked gently. He flushed slightly.

"Too often, I'm afraid! But how can I help it? One must do something to kill time!"

"Poor Time!" said Maryllia, with a smile—"Why should he be killed? I would rather make much of him while I have him!"

Charlemont did not answer. He lit a cigar and strolled away by himself to meditate.

Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay just then re-entered the drawing-room from the garden, fanning herself vigorously with her handkerchief.

"It is so frightfully warm!" she complained—"Such a burning sun! So bad for the skin! They are picking strawberries and eating them off the plants—very nice, I daresay—but quite messy. Eva Beaulyon and two of the men have taken a boat and gone on the water. If you don't mind, Maryllia, I shall rest and massage till dinner."

"Pray do so!" returned Maryllia, kindly, smiling, despite herself; Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay's life was well-nigh spent in 'massage' and various other processes for effacing the prints of Time from her carefully guarded epidermis—"But I was just going to ask Cicely to play us something. Won't you wait five minutes and hear her?"

Mrs. Courtenay sighed and sank into a chair. Nothing bored her so utterly as music,—but as it was only for 'five minutes,' she resigned herself to destiny. And Cicely, at a sign from Maryllia, went to the piano and played divinely,—wild snatches of Polish and Hungarian folk-songs, nocturnes and romances, making the instrument speak a thousand things of love and laughter, of sorrow and death,—till the glorious rush of melody captivated some of the wanderers in the garden and brought them near the open window to listen. When she ceased, there was a little outbreak of applause, and Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay rose languidly.

"Yes, very nice!" she said—"Very nice indeed! But you know, Maryllia, if you would only get one of those wonderful box things one sees advertised so much in the papers, the pianista or mutoscope or gramophone—no, I *think* it's pianola, but I'm not quite sure—you would save such a lot of study and brain-work for this poor child! And it sounds quite as well! I'm sure she could manage a gramophone thing—I mean pianista-pianola—quite nicely for you when you want any music. Couldn't you, my dear?"

And she gazed at Cicely with a bland kindliness as she put the question. Cicely's eyes sparkled with fun and satire.

"I'm sure I could!" she declared, with the utmost seriousness—"It would be delightful! Just like organ-grinding, only much more so! I should enjoy it of all things! Of course one ought *never* to use the brain in music!"

"Not nowadays,"—said Mrs. Courtenay, with conviction—"Things have improved so much. Mechanism does everything so well. And it is *such* a pity to use up one's vital energy in doing what one of those box-things can do better. And do you too play music?"

And she addressed herself to Adderley who happened to be standing near her. He made one of his fantastic salutes.

"Not I, madam! I am merely a writer,—one who makes rhymes and verses——"

Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay waved him away with a hand on which at least five diamond rings sparkled gorgeously.

"Oh dear! Don't come near me!" she said, with a little affected laugh—"I simply *hate* poetry! I'm so sorry you write it! I can't think why you do. Do you like it?—or are you doing it for somebody because you must?"

Julian smiled, and ran his fingers through his hair, sticking it up rather on end, much to Mrs. Courtenay's abhorrence.

"I like it more than anything else in the world!" he said. "I'm doing it quite for myself, and for nobody else."

"Really!"—and Mrs. Courtenay gave him a glance of displeased surprise—"How dreadful!" Here she turned to Maryllia. "Au revoir, my dear, for the present! As you

won't allow any Bridge, I'm going to sleep. Then I shall do massage for an hour. May I have tea in my own room?"

"Certainly!" said Maryllia.

"Thanks!" She glided out, with a frou-frou of her silken skirts and a trail of perfume floating after her.

The three she left behind her exchanged amused glances.

"Wonderful woman!" said Adderley,—"And, no doubt, a perfectly happy one!"

"Why of course! I don't suppose she has ever shed a tear, lest it should make a wrinkle!" And Cicely, as she made these remarks, patted her own thin, sallow cheeks consolingly; "Look at my poor face and hers! Mine is all lined and puckered with tears and sad thoughts—*she* hasn't a wrinkle! And I'm fourteen, and she's forty! Oh dear! Why did I cry so much over all the sorrow and beauty of life when I was young!"

"Ah—and why didn't you have a pianista-pianola!" said Adderley. They all laughed,—and then at Maryllia's suggestion, joined the rest of the guests in the garden.

That same evening when Maryllia was dressing for dinner, there came a tap at her bedroom door, and in response to her 'Come in!' Eva Beaulyon entered.

"May I speak to you alone for a minute?" she said.

Maryllia assented, giving a sign to her maid to leave the room.

"Well, what is it, Eva?" said Maryllia, when the girl had gone—"Anything wrong?"

Eva Beaulyon sank into a chair somewhat wearily, and her beautiful violet eyes, despite artistic 'touching up' looked hard and tired.

"Not so far as I am concerned,"—she said, with a little mirthless laugh—"Only I think you behaved very oddly this afternoon. Do you really mean that you object to Bridge on Sundays, or was it only a put on?"

"It was a put off!" responded Maryllia, gaily—"It stopped the intended game! Seriously, Eva, I meant it and I do mean it. There's too much Bridge everywhere—and I don't

think it necessary,—I don't think it even decent—to keep it going on Sundays."

"I suppose the parson of your parish has told you that!"—said Lady Beaulyon, suddenly.

Maryllia's eyes met hers with a smile.

"The parson of the parish has not presumed to dictate to me on my actions,"—she said—"I should deeply resent it if he did."

"Well, he had no eyes for anyone but you in the church this morning. A mole could have seen that in the dark. He was preaching *at* us and *for* you all the while!"

A slight flush swept over Maryllia's cheeks,—then she laughed.

"My dear Eva! I never thought you were imaginative! The parson has nothing whatever to do with me,—why, this is the first Sunday I have ever been to his church,—you know I never go to church."

Lady Beaulyon looked at her narrowly, unconvinced.

"What have you left your aunt for?" she asked.

"Simply because she wants me to marry Roxmouth, and I won't!" said Maryllia, emphatically.

"Why not?"

"First, because I don't love him,—second, because he has slandered me by telling people that I am running after his title, to excuse himself for running after Aunt Emily's millions; and lastly, but by no means leastly, because he is—unclean."

"All men are;" said Eva Beaulyon, drily—"It's no use objecting to that!"

Maryllia made no remark. She was standing before her dressing-table, singing softly to herself, while she dexterously fastened a tiny diamond arrow in her hair.

"I suppose you're going to try and 'live good' down here,"—went on Lady Beaulyon, after a pause—"It's a mistake,—no one born of human flesh and blood can do it. You can't 'live good' and enjoy yourself!"

"No?" said Maryllia, tentatively.

"No, certainly not! For if you never do anything out

of the humdrum line, and never compromise yourself in any way, Society will be so furious with your superiority to itself that it will invent a thousand calumnies and hang them all on your name. And you will never know how they arise, and never be able to disprove them."

"Does it matter?"—and Maryllia smiled—"If one's conscience is clear, need one care what people say?"

"Conscience!" exclaimed Lady Beaulyon—"What an old-fashioned expression! Surely it's better to do something people can lay hold of and talk about, than have them invent something you have never done! They will give you no credit for virtue or honesty in this world, Maryllia, unless you grow ugly and deformed. Then perhaps they will admit you may be good, and they will add—'She has no temptation to be otherwise.'"

"I do not like your code of morality, Eva," said Maryllia, quietly.

"Perhaps not, but it's the only one that works in *our* day!" replied Eva, with some heat,—"Surely you know that?"

"I try to forget it as much as possible,"—and Maryllia's eyes were full of a sweet wistfulness as she spoke—"Especially here—in my father's home!"

"Oh well!" said Lady Beaulyon, with a touch of impatience—"You are a strange girl—you always were! You can 'live good,' or try to, if you like; and stay down here all alone with the doldrums and the humdrums. But you'll be sick of it in six months. I'm sure you will! Not a man will come near you,—they hate virtuous women nowadays,—and scarce a woman will come either, save old and ugly ones! You will kill yourself socially altogether by the effort. Life's too short to lose all the fun out of it for the sake of an ideal or a theory!"

Here the gong sounded for dinner. Maryllia turned away from her dressing-table, and confronted her friend. Her face was grave and earnest in its expression, and her eyes were very steadfast and clear.

"I don't want what you call 'fun,' Eva,"—she said—"I

want love! Love seems to me the only good thing in life. Do you understand? You ask me why I left my aunt—it was to escape a loveless marriage,—a marriage that would be a positive hell to me for which neither wealth nor position could atone. As for 'living good,' I'm not trying that way. I only want to understand myself, and find out my own possibilities and limitations. And if I never do win the love I want,—if no one ever cares for me at all, then I shall be perfectly content to live and die unmarried."

"What a fate!" laughed Lady Beaulyon, shrugging her white shoulders.

"A better one than the usual divorce court result of some 'society' marriages,"—said Maryllia, calmly—"Anyhow, I'd rather risk single blessedness than united 'cussedness'! Let us go down to dinner, Eva! On all questions pertaining to 'Souls' and modern social ethics, we must agree to differ!"

CHAPTER XX

FOR the next fortnight St. Rest was a scene of constant and unwonted excitement. There was a continual coming and going to and from Abbot's Manor,—some of the guests went away to be replaced by others, and some who had intended to spend only a week-end and then depart, stayed on, moved by unaccountable fascination, not only for their hostess, but for the general pleasantness of the house, and the old-world, tranquil and beautiful surroundings of the whole neighbourhood. Lord Charlemont and Mr. Bludlip Courtenay had brought their newest up-to-date motor-cars with them,—terrible objects to the villagers whenever they dashed, like escaped waggons off express trains, through the little street, with their horns blowing violently as though in a fog at sea. Mrs. Frost was ever on the alert lest any of her smaller children should get in the way of these huge rubber-tyred vehicles tearing along at reckless speed,—and old Josey Letherbarrow resolutely refused to go outside his garden gate except on Sundays.

"Not but what I ain't willin' an' cheerful to die whenever the Lord A'mighty sends for me;"—he would say—"But I ain't got no fancy for bein' gashed and jambled."

'Gashed and jambled,' was his own expression,—one that had both novelty and suggestiveness. Unfortunately, it happened that a small pet dog belonging to one of the village schoolboys, no other than Bob Keeley, the admitted sweetheart of Kitty Spruce, had been run over by Mr. Bludlip Courtenay, as that gentleman, driving his car himself, and

staring indifferently through his monocle, had 'timed' his rush through the village to a minute and a half, on a bet with Lord Charlemont,—and 'gashed and jambled' was the only description to apply to the innocent little animal as it lay dead in the dust. Bob Keeley cried for days,—cried so much, in fact, over what he considered 'a wicked murder' that his mother sent for 'Passon' to console him. And Walden, with his usual patience, listened to the lad's sobbing tale:

"Which the little beast wor my friend!" he gasped amid his tears—"An' he wor Kitty's friend too! Kitty's cryin' 'erself sick, same as me! I'd 'ad 'im from a pup—Kitty carried 'im in 'er apron when 'e was a week old,—he loved me—yes 'e did!—an' 'e slept in my weskit iviry night of 'is life!—an' he 'adn't a fault in 'im, all lovin' an' true!—an' now 'e's gone—an'—an'—I *hate* the quality up at the Manor—yes I do!—I *hate* 'em!—an' if Miss Vancourt 'adn't never come 'ome, my doggie 'ad been livin' now, an' we'd all a' bin 'appy!"

Walden patted the boy's rough towzled head gently, and thought of his faithful 'Nebbie.' It would have been mere hypocrisy to preach resignation to Bob, when he, the Reverend John, knew perfectly well that if his own canine comrade had been thus cruelly slain, he also would have 'hated the quality.'

"Look here, Bob," he said at last,—"I know just how you feel! It's just as bad as bad can be. But try and be a man, won't you? You can't bring the poor little creature back to life again,—and it's no use frightening your mother with all this grief for what cannot be helped. Then there's poor Kitty—*she* 'hates the quality';—her little heart is sore and full of bad feelings—all for the sake of you and your dog, Bob! She's giving her mother no end of trouble up at the Manor, crying and fretting—suppose you go and see her? Talk it over together, like two good children, and try if you can't comfort each other. What do you say?"

Bob rose from beside the chair where he had flung himself on his knees when Walden had entered his mother's cottage,—

and rubbed his knuckles hard into his eyes with a long and dismal sniff.

"I'll try, sir!" he said chokingly, and then suddenly seizing 'Passon's' hand, he kissed it with boyish fervour, caught up his cap, and ran out. Walden stood for a moment inert,—there was an uncomfortable tightness in his throat.

"Poor lad!" he said to himself,—"He is suffering as much in his way as older people suffer in theirs,—perhaps even more,—because to the young, injustice always seems strange—to the old it has become customary and natural!"

He sighed,—and with a pleasant word or two to Mrs. Keeley, who waited at her door for him to come out, and who thanked him profusely for coming to 'hearten up the boy,' he went on his usual round through the village, uncomfortably conscious that perhaps his first impressions respecting Miss Vancourt's home-coming were correct,—and that it might have been better for the peace and happiness of all the simple inhabitants of St. Rest, if she had never come.

Certainly there was no denying that a change had crept over the little sequestered place,—a change scarcely perceptible, but nevertheless existent. A vague restlessness pervaded the atmosphere,—each inhabitant of each cottage was always on the look-out for a passing glimpse of one of the Abbot's Manor guests, or one of the Abbot's Manor servants,—it did not matter which, so long as something or somebody from the Manor came along. Sir Morton Pippitt had, of course, not failed to take full advantage of any slight surface or social knowledge he possessed of Miss Vancourt's guests,—and had, with his usual bluff pomposity, invited them all over to Badsworth Hall. Some of them accepted his invitation,—others declined it. Lord Charlemont and Mr. Bludlip Courtenay discovered him to be a 'game old boy'—while Lady Wicketts and Miss Fosby found something congenial in the society of Miss Tabitha Pippitt, who, cherishing as she did, an antique-virgin passion for the Reverend John Walden, whom her father detested, had come to regard herself as a sort of silent martyr to the rough usages of this world, and was

therefore not unwilling to listen to the long stories of life's disillusions which Lady Wicketts unravelled for her benefit, and which Miss Fosby, with occasional references to the photographs and prints of the 'Madonna' or the 'Girl with Lilies' tearfully confirmed. So the motor-cars continually flashed between Abbot's Manor and Badsworth Hall, and Lady Beaulyon apparently found so much to amuse her that she stayed on longer than she had at first intended. So did Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay. They had their reasons for prolonging their visit,—reasons more cogent than love of fresh air, or admiration of pastoral scenery. Both of them kept up an active correspondence with Maryllia's aunt, Mrs. Fred Vancourt, a lady who was their 'very dear' friend, owing to her general usefulness in the matter of money. And Mrs. Fred having a fixed plan in her mind concerning the welfare and good establishment of her niece, they were not unwilling to assist her in the furtherance of her views, knowing that whatever trouble they took would be substantially rewarded 'under the rose.'

So they remained, on one excuse or the other,—while other guests came or went, and took long walks and motor-rides in the neighbourhood and amused themselves pretty much in their own way, Maryllia rightly considering that to be the truest form of hospitality. She herself, however, was living a somewhat restrained life among them,—and she began to realise more than ever the difference between 'friends' and 'acquaintances,' and the hopeless *ennui* engendered by the proximity of the latter, without the sympathy of the former. She was learning the lesson that cannot be too soon mastered by everyone who seeks for pure happiness in this world—'The Kingdom of God is within you.' In herself she was not content,—yet she knew no way in which to make herself contented. "I want something"—she said to herself—"Yet I do not know what I want." Her pleasantest time during the inroad of her society friends, was, when, after her daily housekeeping consultations with Mrs. Spruce, she could go and have a chat with Cicely in that young person's small

study, which was set apart for her, next to her bedroom nearly at the top of the house, and which commanded a wide view of the Manor park-lands, and the village of St. Rest, with the silvery river winding through it and the spire of the church rising from the surrounding foliage like a finger pointing to heaven. And she also found relief from the strain of constant entertaining by rising early in the mornings and riding on her favourite 'Cleopatra' all over her property, calling on her new agent, Frank Stanways, and his wife, and chatting with the various persons in her employ. She did not however go much into the village, and on this point one morning her agent ventured to observe——

"Old Mr. Letherbarrow has been saying that he has not seen you lately, Miss Vancourt,—not since your friends came down. He seems to miss you very much."

Maryllia, swaying lightly in her saddle, stooped over her mare's neck and patted it, to hide sudden tears that sprang, she knew not why, to her eyes.

"Poor Josey!" she said—"I'm sorry! Tell him I'll come as soon as all my visitors are gone—they will not stay long. The dinner-party next week concludes everything. Then I shall have time to go about the village as usual."

"That will be delightful!" said Alicia Stanways, a bright little woman, whose introduction and supervision of a 'model dairy' on the Abbot's Manor estate was the pride of her life—"It really makes all the people happy to see you! Little Ipsie Frost was actually crying for you the other day."

"Was she? Poor little soul! The idea of a child crying for me! It's quite a novel experience!" And Maryllia laughed—"But I don't think I'm wanted at all in the village. Mr. Walden does everything."

"So he does!'—agreed Stanways—"He's a true 'minister' if there ever was one. Still, he has not been quite so much about lately."

"No?" queried Maryllia—"I expect he's very busy!"

"I think he has only one wish in the world!" said Mrs. Stanways, smiling.

"What is that?" asked Maryllia, still stroking 'Cleopatra's' glossy neck thoughtfully.

"To fill the big rose-window in the church with stained glass,—real 'old' stained glass! He's always having some bits sent to him, and I believe he passes whole hours piecing it together. It's his great hobby. He won't have a morsel that is not properly authenticated. He's dreadfully particular,—but then all old bachelors are!"

Maryllia smiled, and bidding them good-morning cantered off. She was curiously touched at the notion of old Josey Letherbarrow missing her, and 'Baby Hippolyta' crying for her.

"Not one of my society friends would miss me!"—she said to herself—"And certainly I know nobody who would cry for me!" She checked her thoughts—"Except Cicely. *She* would miss me,—*she* would cry for me! But, in plain matter-of-fact terms, there is no one else who cares for me. Only Cicely!"

She looked up as she rode, and saw that she was passing the 'Five Sisters,' now in all the glorious panoply of opulent summer leafage. Moved by a sudden impulse, she galloped up the knoll, and drew rein exactly at the spot where she had given Oliver Leach his dismissal, and where she had first met John Walden. The wind rustled softly through the boughs, which bent and swayed before her, as though the grand old trees said: 'Thanks to you, we live!' Birds flew from twig to twig,—and the persistent murmur of many bees working amid the wild thyme which spread itself in perfumed purple patches among the moss and grass, sounded like the far-off hum of a human crowd.

"I did something useful when I saved you, you dear old beeches!" she said—"But the worst of it is I've done nothing worth doing since!"

She sighed, and her pretty brows puckered into a perplexed line, as she slowly guided 'Cleopatra' down the knoll again.

"It's all so lonely!" she murmured—"I felt just a little dull

before Eva Beaulyon and the others came,—but it's ever so much duller with them than without them!"

That afternoon, in compliance with a particularly pressing request from Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay, she accompanied a party of her guests to Badsworth, driving thither in Lord Charlemont's motor. Sir Morton Pippitt, red-faced and pompous as usual, met them at the door, in all the resplendency of new grey summer tweeds and prominent white waistcoat, his clean-shaven features shining with recent soap, and his white hair glistening like silver. He was quite in his element, as he handed out the beautiful Lady Beaulyon from the motor-car, and expressed his admiration for her looks in no unmeasured terms,—he felt himself to be almost an actual Badsworth, of Badsworth Hall, as he patted Lord Charlemont familiarly on the shoulder, and called him 'My dear boy!' As he greeted Maryllia, he smiled at her knowingly.

"I think I have a friend of yours here to-day, my dear lady!" he said, with an expressive chuckle—"Someone who is most anxious to see you!" And escorting her with obtrusive gallantry into the hall, he brought her face to face with a tall, elegant, languid-looking man who bowed profoundly; "I believe you know Lord Roxmouth?"

The blood sprang to her brows,—and for a moment she was so startled and angry that she could scarcely breathe. A swift glance from under her long lashes showed her the situation—how Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay was watching her with ill-concealed amusement, and how all the rest of the party were expectant of a 'sensation.' She saw it all in a moment,—she recognised that a trap had been laid for her to fall into unwarily, and realising the position she rose to it at once.

"How do you do!" she said, carelessly, nodding her head without giving her hand—"I thought I should meet you this afternoon!"

"Did you really!" murmured Roxmouth—"Some magnetic current of thought——"

"Yes,—'by the pricking of my thumbs, Something wicked this way comes!'——*that* sort of sensation, you know!" and

she laughed; then perceiving a man standing in the background whose sleek form and lineaments she instantly recognised, she added——"And how are you, Mr. Longford? Did you bring Lord Roxmouth here, or did he bring you?"

Marius Longford 'of the Savage and Savile,' was taken by surprise, and looked a little uncomfortable. He stroked one pussy whisker.

"We came together," he explained in his affected falsetto voice——"Sir Morton Pippitt was good enough to invite me to bring any friend,——and so——"

"I see!" and Maryllia lifted her little head with an unconscious gesture, implying pride, or disdain, or both, as she passed with the other guests into the Badsworth Hall drawing-room;——"The country is so delightful at this time of year!"

She moved on. Lord Roxmouth stroked down his fair moustache to hide a smile, and quietly followed her. He was a good-looking man, tall and well-built, with a rather pale, clean-cut face, and sandy hair brushed very smooth;—form and respectability were expressed in the very outline of his figure and the fastidious neatness and nicety of his clothes. Entering the room where Miss Tabitha Pippitt was solemnly presiding over the tea-tray with a touch-me-not air of inflexible propriety, he soon made himself the useful and agreeable centre of a group of ladies, to whom he carried cake, bread-and-butter and other light refreshments, with punctilious care, looking as though his life depended upon the exact performance of these duties. Once or twice he glanced at Maryllia, and decided that she appeared younger and prettier than when he had seen her in town. She was chatting with some of the county people, and Lord Roxmouth waited for several moments in vain for an opportunity to intervene. Finally, securing a cup of iced coffee, he carried it to her.

"No, thanks!" she said, as he approached.

"Strawberries?" he suggested, appealingly.

"Nothing, thank you!"

Smiling a little, he looked at her.

"I wish you would give me a word, Miss Vancourt! Won't you?"

"A dozen, if you like!"—she replied, indifferently—"How is Aunt Emily?"

"I am glad you ask after her!"—he said, impressively—"She is well,—but she misses you very much." He paused, and added in a lower tone—"So do I!"

She was silent.

"I know you are angry!"—he went on softly—"You went away from London to avoid me, and you are vexed to see me down here. But I couldn't resist the temptation of coming. Marius Longford told me he had called upon you with Sir Morton Pippitt at Abbot's Manor,—and I got him to bring me down on a visit to Badsworth Hall,—only to be near you! You are looking quite lovely, Maryllia!"

She raised her eyes and fixed them full on him. His own fell.

"I said you were angry, and you are!" he murmured—"But you have the law in your own hands,—you need not ask me to your house unless you like!"

The buzz of conversation in the room was now loud and incessant. Sir Morton Pippitt's 'afternoon teas' were always more or less bewildering and brain-jarring entertainments, where a great many people of various 'sets,' in the town of Riversford and the county generally, came together, without knowing each other, or wishing to know each other,—where the wife of the leading doctor in Riversford, for example, glowered scorn and contempt on Mrs. Mordaunt Appleby, the wife of the brewer in the same town, and where those of high and unimpeachable 'family,' like Mrs. Mandeville Poreham, whose mother was a Beedle, stared frigidly and unseeingly at every one hailing from the same place as creatures beneath their notice.

For—"Thank God!"—said Mrs. Poreham, with feeling,—"I do not live in Riversford. I would not live in Riversford if I were paid a fortune to do so! My poor mother never permitted me to associate with tradespeople. There are no ladies or gentlemen in Riversford,—I should be expected to

shake hands with my butcher if I resided there,—but I am proud and glad to say that at present I know nobody in the place. I never intend to know anybody there!"

Several curious glances were turned upon Miss Vancourt as she stood near an open window looking out on the Badsworth Hall 'Italian Garden,'—a relic of Badsworth times,—her fair head turned away from the titled aristocrat who bent towards her, as it seemed, in an attitude of humble appeal,—and one or two would-be wise persons nodded their heads and whispered —"That's the man she's engaged to." "Oh, really!——and his name——?" "Lord Roxmouth;—will be Duke of Ormistoune——" "Good gracious! *That* woman a Duchess!" snorted Mrs. Mordaunt Appleby, as she heard—"The men must be going mad!" Which latter remark implied that had she not unfortunately married a brewer, she might easily have secured the Ormistoune ducal coronet herself.

Unaware of the gossip going on around her, Maryllia stayed where she was at the window, coldly silent, her eyes fixed on the glowing flower-beds patterned in front of her,—the gorgeous masses of petunias, and flame-coloured geraniums,—the rich saffron and brown tints of thick clustered calceolarias,—the purple and crimson of pendulous fuchsias, whose blossoms tumbled one upon the other in a riot of splendid colour,—and all at once her thoughts strayed capriciously to the cool green seclusion of John Walden's garden. She remembered the spray of white lilac he had given her, and fancied she could almost inhale again its delicious perfume. But the lilac flowering-time was over now—and the roses had it all their own way,—she had given a rose in exchange for the lilac, and— Here she started almost nervously as Lord Roxmouth's voice again fell on her ears.

"You are not sparing me any of your attention," he said—"Your mind is engrossed with something—or somebody—else! Possibly I have a rival?"

He smiled, but there was a quick hard gleam of suspicion in his cold grey eyes. Maryllia gave him a look of supreme disdain.

"You are insolent," she said, speaking in very low but emphatic tones—"You always were! You presume too much on Aunt Emily's encouragement of your attentions to me, which you know are unwelcome. You are perfectly aware that I left London to escape a scheme concocted by you and her to so compromise me in the view of society, that no choice should be left to me save marriage with you. Now you have followed me here, and I know why! You have come to try and find out what I do with myself—to spy upon my actions and occupations, and take back your report to Aunt Emily. You are perfectly welcome to enter upon this congenial task! You can visit me at my own house,—you can play detective all over the place, if you are happy in that particular rôle. Every opportunity shall be given you!"

He bowed. "Thank you!" And stroking his moustache, as was his constant habit, he smiled again. "You are really very cruel to me, Maryllia! Why can I never win your confidence—I will not say your affection? May I not know?"

"You may!"—she answered coldly—"It is because there is nothing in you to trust and nothing to value. I have told you this so often that I wonder you want to be told it again! And though I give you permission to call on me at my own home, —just to save you the trouble of telling Aunt Emily that her 'eccentric' niece was too 'peculiar' to admit you there,—I reserve to myself the right at any moment to shut the door against you."

She moved from him then, and seeing the Ittlethwaites of Ittlethwaite Park, went to speak to them. He stood where she had left him, surveying the garden in front of him with absolute complacency. Mr. Marius Longford joined him.

"Well?" said the light of the Savage and Savile tentatively.

"Well! She is the same ungovernable termagant as ever, —conceited little puss! But she always amuses me—that's one consolation!" He laughed, and taking out his cigar-case, opened it. "Will you have one?" Longford accepted the favour. "Who is this old fellow, Pippitt?" he asked—"Any relation of the dead and gone Badsworths? How does he get

Badsworth Hall? Doesn't he grind bones to make his bread, or something of that kind?"

Longford explained, with civil obsequiousness that Sir Morton Pippitt had certainly once 'ground bones,' but that he had 'retired' from such active service, while still retaining the largest share in the bone business. That he had bought Badsworth Hall as it stood,—pictures, books, furniture and all, for what was to him a mere trifle; and that he was now assuming to himself by lawful purchase, the glory of the whole deceased Badsworth family.

Lord Roxmouth shrugged his shoulders in contempt.

"Such will be the fate of Roxmouth Castle!" he said—"Some grinder of bones or maker of beer will purchase it, and perhaps point out the picture of the founder of the house as being that of a former pot-boy!"

"The old order changeth,"—said Longford, with a chill smile—"And I suppose we should learn to accustom ourselves to it. But you, with your position and good looks, should be able to prevent any such possibility as you suggest. Miss Vancourt is not the only woman in the world."

"By no means,"—and Roxmouth strolled into the garden, Longford walking beside him—"But she is the only woman I at present know, who, if she obeys her aunt's wishes, will have a fortune of several millions. And just because such a little devil *should* be mastered and *must* be mastered, I have resolved to master her. That's all!"

"And, to your mind, sufficient,"—said Longford—"But if it is a question of the millions chiefly, there is always the aunt herself."

Roxmouth stared—then laughed.

"The aunt!" he ejaculated—"The aunt?"

"Why not?" And Longford stole a furtive look round at the man who was his chief literary patron—"The aunt is handsome, well-preserved, not more than forty-five at most—and I should say she is a woman who could be easily led—through vanity."

"The aunt!" again murmured Roxmouth—"My dear

Longford! What an appalling suggestion! Mrs. Fred as the Duchess of Ormistoune! Forbid it, Heaven!"

Then suddenly he laughed aloud.

"By Jove! It would be too utterly ridiculous! Whatever made you think of such a thing?"

"Only the prospect you yourself suggested,"—replied Longford—"That of seeing a brewer or a bone-melter in possession of Roxmouth Castle. Surely even Mrs. Fred would be preferable to that!"

With an impatient exclamation Roxmouth suddenly changed the subject; but Longford was satisfied that he had sown a seed, which might,—time and circumstances permitting,—sprout and grow into a tangible weed or flower.

Maryllia meantime had made good her escape from the scene of Sir Morton Pippitt's 'afternoon-tea' festivity. Gently moving through the throng with that consummate grace which was her natural heritage, she consented to be introduced to the 'county' generally, smiling sweetly upon all, and talking so kindly to the Mandeville Poreham girls, that she threw them into fluttering ecstasies of delight, and caused them to declare afterwards to their mother that Miss Vancourt was the sweetest, dearest, darlingest creature they had ever met! She stood with patience while Sir Morton Pippitt, over-excited by the presence of the various 'titled' personages in his house, guffawed and blustered in her face over the 'little surprise' he had prepared for her in the unexpected appearance of Lord Roxmouth;—she listened to his "Ha!-ha!-ha! My dear lady! We know a thing or two! Handsome fellow,—handsome fellow! Think of a poor old plain Knight when you are a Duchess! Ha!-ha!-ha! God bless my soul!"——and without a word in confirmation or denial of his blatant observations, she managed to slip gradually out of the drawing-room to the hall and thence to the carriage drive, where she found, as she thought she would, Lord Charlemont looking tenderly into the mechanism of his motor-car, unscrewing this, peering into that, and generally hanging round the vehicle with a fatuous lover's enthusiasm.

"Would you mind taking me back to St. Rest now?" she enquired—"I have an appointment in the village—you can do the journey in no time."

"Delighted!" And Charlemont got his machine into the proper state of spluttering, gasping eagerness to depart. "Anyone coming with you?"

"No—nobody knows I am leaving." And Maryllia mounted lightly into the car. "You can return and fetch the others afterwards. Put me down at the church, please!"

In a moment more the car flashed down the drive and out of Badsworth Hall precincts, and was soon panting and pounding along the country road at most unlawful speed. As a rule Maryllia hated being in a motor-car, but on this occasion she was glad of the swift rush through the air; had the vehicle torn madly down a precipice she would scarcely have cared, so eager was she to get away from the hateful vicinity of Lord Roxmouth. She was angry too—angry with Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay, whose hand she recognised in the matter as having so earnestly begged her to go to Badsworth Hall that afternoon,—she despised Sir Morton Pippitt for lending himself to the scheme,—and with all her heart she loathed Mr. Marius Longford who she at once saw was Roxmouth's paid tool. The furious rate at which Lord Charlemont drove his car was a positive joy to her—and as he was much too busy with his steering gear to speak, she gave herself up to the smouldering indignation that burned in her soul while she was, so to speak, carried through space as on a panting whirlwind.

"Why can they not leave me alone!" she thought passionately—"How dare they follow me to my own home!—my own lands!—and spy upon me in everything I do! It is a positive persecution and more than that,—it is a wicked design on Aunt Emily's part to compromise me with Roxmouth. She wants to set people talking down here in the country just as she set them talking in town, and to make everyone think I am engaged to him, or *ought* to be engaged to him. It is cruel!—I suppose I shall be driven away from here just as I have been driven from London,—is

there *no* way in which I can escape from this man whom I hate!—*no* place in the world where he cannot find me and follow me!"

The brown line of thatched roofs through the trees here caused Lord Charlemont to turn round and address her.

"Just there!" he said, briefly—"Six minutes exactly!"

"Good!" said Maryllia, nodding approvingly—"But go slowly through the village, won't you? There are so many dear little children always playing about."

He slackened speed at once, and with a weird toot-tootling of his horn guided the car on at quite a respectable ambling-donkey pace.

"You said the church?"

"Yes, please!"

Another minute, and she had alighted.

"Thanks so much!" she said, smiling up into his goggle-guarded eyes. "Will you rush back for the others, please? And—and—may I ask you a favour?"

"A thousand!" he answered, thinking what a pretty little woman she was, as he spoke.

"Well—don't—even if they want you to do so,—don't bring Lord Roxmouth or Mr. Marius Longford back to the Manor. They are Sir Morton Pippitt's friends and guests—they are not mine!"

A faint flicker of surprise passed over the aristocratic motor-driver's features, but he made no observation. He merely said:

"All right! I'm game!"

Which brief sentence meant, for Lord Charlemont, that he was loyal to the death. He was not romantic in the style of expressing himself,—he would not have understood how to swear fealty on a drawn sword—but when he said—'I'm game,'—it came to the same thing. Reversing his car, he sped away, whizzing up the road like a boomerang, back to Badsworth Hall. Maryllia watched him till he was out of sight,—then with a sigh of relief, she turned and looked wistfully at the church. Its beautiful architecture had the appearance of worn ivory in the mellow radiance of the late

afternoon, and the sculptured figures of the Twelve Apostles in their delicately carved niches, six on either side of the portal, seemed almost life-like, as the rays of the warm and brilliant sunshine, tempered by a touch of approaching evening, struck them aslant as with a luminance from heaven. She lifted the latch of the churchyard gate,—and walking slowly with bent head between the rows of little hillocks where, under every soft green quilt of grass lay someone sleeping, she entered the sacred building. It was quite empty. There was a scent of myrtle and lilies in the air,—it came from two clusters of blossoms which were set at either side of the gold cross on the altar. Stepping softly, and with reverence, Maryllia went up to the Communion rails, and looked long and earnestly at the white alabaster sarcophagus which, in its unknown origin and antiquity was the one unsolved mystery of St. Rest. A vague sensation of awe stole upon her,—and she sank involuntarily on her knees.

"If I could pray now,"—she thought—"What should I pray for?"

And then it seemed that something wild and appealing rose in her heart and clamoured for an utterance which her tongue refused to give,—her bosom heaved,—her lips trembled,—and suddenly a rush of tears blinded her eyes.

"Oh, if I were only *loved*!" she murmured under her breath—"If only someone could find me worth caring for! I would endure any suffering, any loss, to win this one priceless gift of life,—love!"

A little smothered sob broke from her lips.

"Father! Mother!" she whispered, instinctively stretching out her hands—"I am so lonely!—so very very lonely!"

Only silence answered her, and the dumb perfume of the altar flowers. She rose,—and stood a moment trying to control herself,—a pretty little pitiful figure in her dainty, garden-party frock, a soft white chiffon hat tied on under her rounded chin with a knot of pale blue ribbon, and a tiny cobweb of a lace kerchief in her hand with which she dried her wet eyes.

"Oh dear!" she sighed—"It's no use crying! It only shows what a weak little idiot I am! I'm lonely, of course, —I can't expect anything else! I shall always be lonely—Roxmouth and Aunt Emily will take care of that. The lies they will tell about me will keep off every man but the one mean and slanderous fortune-hunter, to whom lies are second nature. And as I won't marry *him*, I shall be left to myself—I shall be an old maid. Though that doesn't matter—old maids are often the happiest women. Anyhow, I'd rather be an old maid than Duchess of Ormistoune!"

She dabbed her eyes with the little handkerchief again, and went slowly out of the church. And as she stepped from the shadow of its portal into the sunshiny open air, she came face to face with John Walden. He started back at the sudden sight of her,—then recollecting himself, raised his hat, looking at her with questioning eyes.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Walden!" she said, affecting a sprightly air—"Are you quite well?"

He smiled.

"Quite. And you? You look——"

"As if I had been crying, I suppose?"—she suggested. "So I have. Women often cry."

"They do,—but——"

"But why should they?—you would say, being a man,"—and Maryllia forced a laugh—"And that's a question difficult to answer! Are you going into the church?"

"Not for a service, or on any urgent matter,"—replied John—"I left a book in the vestry which I want to refer to,—that's all."

"Fetch it," said Maryllia—"I'll wait for you here."

He glanced at her—and saw that her lips trembled, and that she was still on the verge of tears. He hurried off at once, realising that she wanted a minute or two to recover herself. His heart beat foolishly fast and uncomfortably,—he wondered what had grieved or annoyed her.

"Poor little soul!" he murmured, reflecting on a conversation with which Julian Adderley had regaled him the previous

day, concerning some of the guests at Abbot's Manor—"Poor, weary, sweet little soul!"

While Maryllia, during his brief absence was thinking—"I won't cry, or he'll take me for a worse fool than I am. He looks so terribly intellectual!—so wise and cool and calm!—and yet I think—I *think* he was rather pleased to see me!"

She smoothed her face into a smile,—gave one or two more reproving taps to her eyelids with her morsel of a kerchief, and was quite self-possessed when he returned, with a worn copy of the Iliad under his arm.

"Is that the book you wanted?" she asked.

"Yes;"—and he showed it to her—"I admit it had no business to be left in the church."

She peeped between the covers.

"Oh, it's all Greek!"—she said—"Do you read Greek?"

"It is one of the happiest accomplishments I learned at college,"—he replied. "I have eased many a heartache by reading Homer in the original."

She looked meditative.

"Now that's very strange!" she murmured—"I should never have thought that to read Homer in the original Greek would ease a heartache! How does it do it? Will you teach me?"

She raised her eyes—how beautiful and blue they were he thought!—more beautiful for the mist of weeping that still lingered about their soft radiance.

"I will teach you Greek, if you like, with pleasure!"—he said, smiling a little, though his lips trembled—"But whether it would cure any heartache of yours I could not promise!"

"Still, if it cures *your* heartaches?" she persisted.

"Mine are of a different character, I think!"—and the smile in his eyes deepened, as he looked down at her wistfully upturned face,—"I am getting old,—you are still young. That makes all the difference. My aches can be soothed by philosophy,—yours could only be charmed away by——"

He broke off abruptly. The hot blood rose to his temples, and retreated again, leaving him very pale.

She looked at him earnestly.

"Well!—by what?"

"I imagine you know, Miss Vancourt! There is only one thing that can ease the burden of life for a woman, and that is—love!"

She nodded her fair head sagaciously.

"Of course! But that is just what I shall never have,—so it's no use wanting it. I had better learn to read Greek at once, without delay! When shall I come for my first lesson?"

She laughed unforcedly now, as she looked up at him. They were walking side by side out of the churchyard.

"You are much to busy to learn Greek," he said, laughing with her. "Your London friends claim all your time,—much to the regret of our little village."

"Ah!—but they won't be with me very long now,"—she rejoined—"They'll all go after the dinner next week, except Louis Gigue. Gigue is coming for a day or two, and he will perhaps stay on a bit to give lessons to Cicely. But he's not a society man. Oh dear, no! Quite the contrary—he's a perfect savage!—and says the most awful things! Poor old Gigue!"

She laughed again, and looked happier and brighter than she had done for days.

"You have rather spoilt the villagers," went on Walden, as he opened the churchyard gate for her to pass out, and closed it again behind them both. "They've got accustomed to seeing you look in upon them at all hours,—and, of course, they miss you. Little Ipsie Frost especially frets after you."

"I'll go and see her very, very soon," said Maryllia, impulsively; "Dear little thing! When you see her next, tell her I'm coming, won't you?"

"I will," he rejoined,—then paused, looking at her earnestly, "Your friends must find St. Rest a very old-fashioned, world-forgotten sort of place,"—he continued—"And you must, equally, find it difficult to amuse them?"

"Well, perhaps, just a little," she admitted——"The fact is ——but tell it not in Gath—I was happier without them! They

bore me to death! All the same they really mean to be very nice,—they don't care, of course, for the things I care about ——trees and flowers and books and music,—but then I am always such an impossible person!"

"Are you?" His eyes were full of gentleness as he put this question—"I should not have thought that!"

She coloured a little—then changed the subject.

"You have seen Lady Beaulyon, haven't you?" He bent his head in the affirmative—"Isn't she lovely?"

"Not to me," he replied, quietly—"But then I'm no judge."

She looked at him in surprise.

"She is considered the most beautiful woman in England!"

"By whom?" he enquired;—"By society paragraphists who are paid for their compliments?"

Maryllia laughed.

"Oh, I don't know anything about that!" she said—"I never met a paragraphist in my life that I know of. But Eva *is* beautiful—there is no denying it. And Margaret Bludlip Courtenay is called the youngest woman in the world!"

"She looks it!" answered Walden, with great heartiness. "I cannot imagine Time making any sort of mark upon her. Because—if you don't mind my saying so—she has really nothing for Time to write upon!"

His tone was eminently good-natured, and Maryllia glancing at his smiling face laughed gaily.

"You are very wicked, Mr. Walden," she said mirthfully—"In fact, you are a quiz, and you shouldn't be a quiz and a clergyman both together. Oh, by the way! Why did you stop reading the service when we all came in late to church that Sunday?"

He looked full at her.

"Precisely for that reason. Because you all came in late."

Maryllia peered timorously at him, with her pretty head on one side, like an enquiring bird.

"Do you think it was polite?"

Walden laughed.

"I was not studying politeness just then,"—he answered—"I was exercising my own authority."

"Oh!" She paused. "Lady Beaulyon and the others did not like it at all. They thought you were trying to make us ashamed of ourselves."

"They were right"—he said, cheerfully—"I was!"

"Well,—you succeeded,—in a way. But I was very angry!"

He smiled.

"Were you, really? How dreadful! But you got over it?"

"Yes,"—she said, meditatively—"I got over it. I suppose you were right,—and of course we were wrong. But aren't you a very arbitrary person?"

His eyes sparkled mirthfully.

"I believe I am! But I never ask anyone to attend church,—everyone in the parish is free to do as he likes about that. Only if people do come, I expect them to be punctual,—that's all."

"I see! And if they're not, you make them feel very small and cheap about it. People don't like being made small and cheap,—*I* don't, for instance. Now good-bye! You are coming to dine next week, remember!"

"I remember!" he rejoined, as he raised his hat in farewell. "And do you think you will learn Greek?"

"I am sure I will!—as soon as ever all these people are gone. The week after next I shall be quite free again."

"And happy?"

She hesitated.

"Not quite perhaps, but as happy as I ever can be! Good-bye!"

She held out her hand. He pressed it gently, and let her go, watching her as she moved along the road holding up her dainty skirt from the dust, and walking with the ease and graceful carriage which were, to her, second nature. Then he went into his own garden with the Iliad, and addressing his ever attentive and complaisant dog, said:

"Look here, Nebbie—we mustn't think about her! She's a bewildering little person, with a good deal of the witch glamour in her eyes and smile,—and it's quite absurd for such staid and humdrum creatures as you and I, Nebbie, to imagine that we can ever be of the slightest service to her, or to dream that she ever gives us a single thought when she has once turned her back upon us. But it is a pity she should cry about anything!—her eyes were not made for tears—her life was not created for sorrow! It should be all sunshine and roses for her—French damask roses, of course!"—and he smiled—"with their hearts full of perfume and their petals full of colour! As for me, there should only be the grey of her plots of lavender,—lavender that is dried and put away in a drawer, and more often than not helps to give fragrance to the poor corpse ready for burial!"

He sighed, and opened his Homer. Greek, for once, failed to ease his heartache, and the Iliad seemed singularly overstrained and deadly dull.

CHAPTER XXI

THAT evening before joining her guests at the usual eight o'clock repast, Maryllia told Cicely Bourne of the disagreeable 'surprise' which had been treacherously contrived for her at Sir Morton Pippitt's tea-party by the unexpected presence of the loathed wooer whom she sought to avoid.

"Margaret Bludlip Courtenay must certainly have known he was to be there,"—she said—"And I think, from her look, Eva Beaulyon knew also. But neither of them gave me a hint. And now if I were to say anything they would only laugh and declare that they 'thought it would be fun.' There's no getting any help or sympathy out of such people. I'm sorry!—but—as usual—I must stand alone."

"I daresay every one of them was in the plot—men and all, if the truth were told!"—burst out Cicely, indignantly—"And Mrs. Fred is at the bottom of the mischief. It's a shame! Your aunt is a brute, Maryllia! I would say so to her face if she were here! She's a calculating, selfish, title-grubbing brute! There! What are you going to do?"

"Nothing!"—and Maryllia looked thoughtfully out of window at the flaming after-glow of the sunset, bathing all the landscape in a flood of coppery crimson—"I shall just go on as usual. When I go down to dinner presently, I shall not speak of to-day's incident at all. Eva Beaulyon and Margaret Courtenay will expect me to speak of it—and they will be disappointed. If *they* allude to it, I shall change the subject. And I shall invite Roxmouth and his tame pussy, Mr.

Marius Longford, to dinner next week, as guests of Sir Morton Pippitt,—that's all."

Cicely opened her big dark eyes.

"You will actually invite Roxmouth?"

"Of course I will—of course I *must*. I want everyone here to see and understand how absolutely indifferent I am to him."

"They will never see—they will never understand!" said Cicely, shaking her mop of wild hair decisively—"My dear Maryllia, the colder you are to 'ce cher Roxmouth' the more the world will talk! They will say you are merely acting a part. No woman in her senses, they will swear, would discourage the attentions of a prospective Duke."

"They may say what they like,—they may report me *out* of my senses if they choose!" declared Maryllia, hotly—"I am not a citizeness of the great American Republic that I should sell myself for a title! I have suffered quite enough at the hands of this society sneak, Roxmouth—and I don't intend to suffer any more. His methods are intolerable. There is not a city on the Continent where he has not paid the press to put paragraphs announcing my engagement to him—and he has done the same thing with every payable paper in London. Aunt Emily has assisted him in this,—she has even written some of the announcements herself, sending them to the papers with my portrait and his, for publication! And because this constantly rumoured and expected marriage does not come off, and because people ask *why* it doesn't come off, the pair of conspirators are reduced to telling lies about me! I almost wish I could get small-pox or some other hideous ailment and become disfigured,—*then* Roxmouth might leave me alone! Perhaps Providence will arrange it in that way."

Cicely uttered an exclamation of horror.

"Oh, don't say such a thing, Maryllia! It's too dreadful! You are the prettiest, sweetest creature I ever saw, and I wouldn't have a scar or a blemish on your dear face for a million Roxmouths! Have patience! We'll get rid of him!"

Maryllia gave a hopeless gesture.

"How?"

"Well, I don't quite know!" and Cicely knitted her black brows perplexedly—"But don't worry, Maryllia! I believe it will all come right. Something will happen to make short work of him,—I'm sure of it!"

"You are an optimist,"—said Maryllia, kissing her—"and you're very young! *I* have learned that in this best of all possible worlds, human nature is often the worst part of all creation, and that when you want to avoid a particularly objectionable human being, that being is always round the corner. However, if I cannot get rid of Roxmouth, I shall do something desperate! I shall disappear!"

"Where to?" asked Cicely, startled.

"I don't know! Nowhere that you cannot find me!"

She laughed,—she had recovered her natural buoyancy and light-heartedness, and when she joined her party at dinner that evening, she showed no traces of annoyance or fatigue. She made no allusion to Lord Roxmouth's appearance at Sir Morton Pippitt's, and Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay, glancing at her somewhat timorously, judged it best to avoid the subject. For she knew she had played a mean trick on the friend whose guest she was,—she knew she had in her pocket a private letter from Mrs. Fred Vancourt, telling her of Lord Roxmouth's arrival at Badsworth Hall, and urging her to persuade Maryllia to go there, and to bring about meetings between the two as frequently as possible,—and as she now and then met the straight flash of her hostess's honest blue eyes, she felt the hot colour rising to her face underneath all her rouge, and for once in her placid daily life of body-massage and self-admiration, she felt discomposed and embarrassed. The men talked the incident of the day over among themselves when they were left to their coffee and cigars, and discussed the probabilities and non-probabilities of Miss Vancourt becoming the Duchess of Ormistoune, with considerable zest.

"She'll never have him—she hates him like poison!"—declared Lord Charlemont.

"Not surprised at that,"—said another man—"if she knows anything about him!"

"He *has* gone the pace!" murmured Mr. Bludlip Courtenay thoughtfully, dropping his monocle out of his eye and hastily putting it back, as though he feared his eye itself might escape from its socket unless thus fenced in—"But then, after all—wild oats! Once sown and reaped, they seldom spring again after marriage."

"I think you're wrong there!" said Charlemont—"Wild oats are a singularly perpetual crop. In many cases marriage seems to give them a fresh start."

"Will there be a good harvest when *you* marry, Charly?" asked one of the company, with a laugh.

"Oh, I shouldn't wonder!" he returned, good-naturedly—"I'm just as big a fool as any other man. But I always do my best not to play down on a woman."

"Woman"—said Mr. Bludlip Courtenay, sententiously—"is a riddle. Sometimes she wants a vote in elections,—then, if it's offered to her, she won't have it. Buy her a pearl, and she says she would rather have had a ruby. Give her a park phaeton, and she declares she has been dying for a closed brougham. Offer her a five-hundred-guinea pair of cobs, and she will burst into tears and say she would have liked a 'little pug-dog—a dear, darling, little Japanese pug-dog'—she has no use for cobs. And to carry the simile further, give her a husband, and she straightway wants a lover."

"That implies that a husband ceases to be a lover,"—said Charlemont.

"Well, I guess a husband can't be doing Romeo and 'oh moon'-ing till he's senile," observed a cadaverous looking man, opposite, who originally hailed from the States, but who, having purchased an estate in England now patriotically sought to forget that he was ever an American.

They laughed.

"'Oh moon'-ing is a good expression,"—said Lord Charlemont—"very good!"

"It's mine, sir—but you're welcome to it,"—rejoined the

Anglicised renegade of the Stars and Stripes,—"To 'oh moon' is a verb every woman likes to have conjugated by a male fool once at least in her life."

"Yes—and if you don't 'oh m-moon' with her,"—lisped a young fellow at the other end of the table—"She considers you a b-b-brute!"

Again the laugh went round.

"Well, I don't think Roxmouth will have a chance to go 'oh moon'-ing with our hostess,"—said Charlemont—"The whole idea of her marriage with him has been faked up by Mrs. Fred. The girl herself,—Miss Vancourt,—doesn't want him, and won't have him."

"Will you take a bet on it?" asked Mr. Bludlip Courtenay.

"Yes, if you like!" and Charlemont laughed—"I don't bet much, but I'll bet anything you choose to name on that. Maryllia Vancourt will never, unless she is bound, gagged and drugged into it, become Duchess of Ormistoune."

"Shall we say a tenner?" suggested Courtenay, writing the bet down in his notebook.

"Certainly."

"Good! I take the other side. I know something of Roxmouth,—he's seldom baffled. Miss Vancourt will be the Duchess before next year!"

"Not a bit of it! Next year Miss Vancourt will still be Miss Vancourt!" said Charlemont, emphatically—"She's a woman of character, and if she doesn't intend to marry Roxmouth, nothing will make her. She's got a mind of her own,—most women's minds are the minds of their favourite men."

"He-he-te-he—te-he—he!" giggled the young man who had before spoken,—"I know a girl——"

"Shut up, old chappie! You 'know a bank whereon the wild thyme grows'—that's what *you* know!" said Charlemont, "Come and have a look at the motor."

Whereupon they rose from the table and dispersed.

From that day, however, a certain additional interest was given to the house-party entertainment at Abbot's Manor. Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay and Lady Beaulyon fell so neatly into

the web which Maryllia carefully prepared for them, that she soon found out what a watch they kept upon her, and knew, without further trouble that she must from henceforth regard them as spies in her aunt and Lord Roxmouth's service. The men took no part in this detective business, but nevertheless were keenly inquisitive in their own line, more bets being given and taken freely on what was likely to be the upshot of affairs. Meanwhile, Lord Roxmouth and Mr. Longford, sometimes accompanied by Sir Morton Pippitt, and sometimes without him, called often, but Maryllia was always out. She had two watch-dogs besides her canine friend, Plato,—and these were Cicely and Julian Adderley. Cicely had pressed the 'moon calf' into her service, and had told him just as much as she thought proper concerning Roxmouth and his persecution of her friend and patroness.

"Go as often as you can to Badsworth Hall,"—she commanded him—"and find out all their movements there. Then tell *me*,—and whenever Roxmouth comes here to call, Maryllia will be out! Be vigilant and faithful!"

And she had shaken her finger at him and rolled her dark eyes with such tragic intensity, that he had entered zealously into the spirit of the little social drama, and had become as it were special reporter of the Roxmouth policy to the opposing party.

But this was behind the scenes. The visible action of the piece appeared just now to be entirely with Maryllia and her lordly wooer,—she as heroine, he as hero,—while the 'supers,' useful in their way as spies, messengers and general attendants, took their parts in the various scenes with considerable vivacity, wondering how much they might possibly get out of it for themselves. If, while they were guests at Abbot's Manor, an engagement between Lord Roxmouth and Maryllia Vancourt could be finally settled, they felt they could all claim a share in having urged the matter on, and 'worked' it. And it was likely that in such a case, Mrs. Fred Vancourt, with millions at her disposal, would be helpful to them in their turn, should they ever desire it. Altogether, it seemed a game worth playing. None of them felt any regret that

Maryllia should be made the pivot round which to work their own schemes of self-aggrandisement. Besides, no worldly-wise society man or woman could be expected to feel sorry for assisting a young woman to attain the position of a Duchess. Such an idea would be too manifestly absurd.

"It will soon be over now,"—said Cicely consolingly, one afternoon in the last week of Maryllia's entertaining—"And oh, how glad we shall be when everybody has gone!"

"There's one person who won't go, I'm afraid!" said Maryllia.

"Roxmouth? Well, even *he* can't stay at Badsworth Hall for ever!"

"No,—but he can stay as long as he likes,—long enough to work mischief. Sir Morton Pippitt won't send him away,—we may be sure of that!"

"If *he* doesn't go, I suppose *we* must?" queried Cicely tentatively.

Maryllia's eyes grew sad and wistful.

"I'm afraid so—I don't know—we shall see!"—she replied slowly—"Something will have to be settled one way or another—pleasantly or unpleasantly."

Cicely's black brows almost met across her nose in a meditative frown.

"What a shame it is that you can't be left in peace, Maryllia!"—she exclaimed—"And all because of your aunt's horrible money! Why doesn't Roxmouth marry Mrs. Fred?"

"I wish he would!" said Maryllia, heartily, and then she began to laugh. "Then it would be a case of 'Oh my prophetic soul! mine uncle!' And I should be able to say: 'My aunt is a Duchess.' Imagine the pride and glory of it!"

Cicely joined in her laughter.

"It *would* be funny!" she said—"But whatever happens, I do hope Roxmouth isn't going to drive us away from the Manor this summer. You won't let him, will you?"

Maryllia hesitated a moment.

"It will depend on circumstances,"—she said, at last—"If he persists in staying at Badsworth, I must leave the neighbour-

hood. There's no help for it. It would only be for a short time, of course—and it seems hard, when I have only just come home, as it were,—but there,—never mind, Cicely! We'll treat it as a game of hare and hounds,—and we'll baffle the hounds somehow!"

Cicely gave a comic gesture of resignation to the inevitable.

"Anyhow, if we want a man to help us,"—she said,—"There's Gigue. Fortunately he's here now."

Gigue *was* there—very certainly there, and all there. Louis Gigue, renowned throughout the world for his culture of the human voice divine, had arrived the previous day direct from Paris, and had exploded into the Manor as though he were a human bombshell. He had entered at the hour of afternoon tea, wild-eyed, wild-haired, travel-soiled, untidy and eminently good-natured, and had taken everybody by surprise. He had rushed up to Maryllia, and seizing her hand had kissed it rapturously,—he had caught Cicely in his arms and embraced her enthusiastically with a 'Mon enfant prodigue!' and, tossing his grizzled locks from off his broad forehead, he had seated himself, sans cérémonie, amidst the company, as though he had known everyone present all his life.

"Mon Dieu, ze mal de mer!" he had exclaimed—"Ze bouleversement of ze vagues! Ze choses terribles! Ze femmes sick!—ze men of ze coleur bleu! Ah, quel ravissement to be in ze land!"

Gigue's English was his own particular dialect—he disdained to try and read a single word of it, but from various sources he had picked up words which he fitted into his speech as best it suited him, with a result which was sometimes effective but more often startling. Maryllia was well accustomed to it, and understood what she called 'Gigue's vernacular'—but the ladies and gentlemen of her house-party were not so well instructed, and Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay, whose knowledge of the French language was really quite extraordinary, immediately essayed the famous singing-master in his own tongue.

"Esker vous avez un moovaig passage, Mo'sieur?" she

demanded, with placid self-assurance—"Le mer etait bien mal?"

Gigue laughed, showing a row of very white strong teeth under his grizzled moustache, as he accepted a cup of tea from Cicely's hand who gave him a meaning blink of her dark eyes as she demurely waited upon him.

"Ah, Madame! Je parle ze Inglis seulement in ze England! Oui, oui! Ze mer etait comme l'huile, mais avec un so-so!" And he swayed his hands to and fro with a rocking movement—"Et le so-so faisaient les dames—ah, ciel!—so-so!"

And he placed his hand delicately to his head, with an inimitable turning aside gesture that caused a ripple of laughter. Maryllia's eyes sparkled with fun. She saw Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay surveying Gigue through her *lorgnon* with an air of polite criticism amounting to disdain,—she noted the men hanging back a little in the way that well-born Britishers do hang back from a foreigner who is 'only' a teacher of singing, especially if they cannot speak his language,—and she began to enjoy herself. She knew that Gigue would say what he thought or what he wanted to say, reckless of censure, and she felt the refreshment and relief of having one, at least, in the group of persons around her, who was not in her Aunt Emily's service, and who uttered frankly his opinions regardless of results.

"Et maintenant,"—said Gigue, taking hold of Cicely's arm and drawing her close up to his knee—"Comment chante le rossignol? Do, ré, mi, fa, sol, la, si, do! Chantez!"

All the members of the house-party stared,—they had taken scarcely any notice of Cicely Bourne, looking upon her as more or less beneath their notice—as 'a child picked up in Paris'—a 'waif and stray'—a 'fad of Maryllia Vancourt's'—and now here was this wild grey-haired man of renown bringing her into sudden prominent notice.

"Chantez!" reiterated Gigue, furrowing his brows into a commanding frown—"Do, ré, mi, fa, sol, la, si, do!"

Cicely's dark eyes flashed—and her lips parted.

"Do—ré—mi—sol-

Round and full and clear rang the notes, pure as a crystal bell,—and the listeners held their breath, as she made such music of the common scale as only a divinely-gifted singer can.

"Bien!—très-bien!" said Gigue, approvingly, with a smile round at the company—"Mademoiselle Cicely commence a chanter! Ze petite sera une grande cantatrice! N'est-ce-pas?"

A stiffly civil wonderment seemed frozen on the faces of Lady Beaulyon and the others present. Wholly lacking in enthusiasm for any art, they almost resented the manner in which Cicely was thus brought forward as a kind of genius, a being superior to them all. Gigue sniffed the air, as though he inhaled offence in it. Then he shook his finger with a kind of defiance.

"Mais—pas en Angleterre!" he said—"Ze petite va commencer à Milan—St. Petersburg—Vienna! Zen, ze Inglis vill say—'Ha ha! Zis prima donna chante pour les Français, les Italiens, les Russes!—il faut qu'elle chante pour nous!' Zen—zey vill pay ze guinea!—ces commes des moutons! Zey follow les autres pays—zey know nosing of ze art demselves!"

Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay coughed delicately.

"Music is so very much overdone in England,"—she said, languidly—"One gets so tired of it! Concerts are quite endless during the season, and singers are always pestering you to take tickets. It's quite too much for anyone who is not a millionaire."

Gigue did not catch this flow of speech—but Cicely heard it.

"Well, I shall never ask anyone to 'take tickets' to hear me!" she said, laughing. "A famous prima donna never does that kind of thing!"

"How do you know you will be famous?" asked Lady Beaulyon, amused.

"Instinct!" replied Cicely, gaily—"Just as the bird knows it will be able to make a nest, so do I know I shall be famous! Don't let us talk any more about singing! Come and see the

garden, Gigue!—I'll take you round it—and I want a chat with you."

The two went off together, much to the relief of the rest of the party.

"What an extraordinary-looking creature!" said Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay—"Is he quite a gentleman, Maryllia?'

Maryllia smiled.

"He is a gentleman according to my standard," she said. "He is honest, true to his friends, and faithful to his work. I ask nothing more of any man."

She changed the subject of conversation,—and Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay, in the privacy of her own apartment, confided to her husband that she really thought Maryllia Vancourt was a little 'off her head'—just a little!

"Because, really,"—said Mrs. Courtenay—"when it comes to harbouring geniuses in one's own house, it is quite beyond all reason! I sympathise so much with poor Mrs. Fred! If Maryllia would only marry Lord Roxmouth, all these flighty and fantastic notions of hers about music and faithful friends and honour and principle would disappear. I am sure they would!—and she would calm down and be just like one of us."

Mr. Bludlip Courtenay stared hard through his monocle.

"Why don't you talk to her about it?" he said—"You might do more for Roxmouth than you are doing, Peggy! I may tell you it would mean good times for both of us if you pushed that affair on!"

Mrs. Courtenay looked meditative.

"I'll try!"—she said, at last—"Roxmouth is to dine here to-morrow night—I'll say something before he comes."

And she did. She took an opportunity of finding Maryllia alone in her morning-room, where she was busy answering some letters. Gliding in, without apology, she sank into the nearest comfortable chair.

"We shall soon all be gone from this dear darling old house!" she said, with a sigh—"When are you coming back to London, Maryllia?"

"Never, I hope,"—Maryllia answered—"I am tired of

London,—and if I go anywhere away from here for a change it will be abroad—ever so far distant!"

"With Lord Roxmouth?" suggested Mrs. Courtenay, with a subtle blink in her eyes.

Maryllia laid down the pen she held, and looked straight at her.

"I think you are perfectly aware that I shall never go anywhere with Lord Roxmouth,"—she said—"Please save yourself the trouble of discussing this subject! I know how anxious you are upon the point—Aunt Emily has, of course, asked you to use your influence to persuade me into this detestable marriage—now do understand me, once and for all, that it's no use. I would rather kill myself than be Lord Roxmouth's wife!"

"But why—" began Mrs. Courtenay, feebly.

"Why? Because I know what kind of a man he is, and how hypocritically he conceals his unnameable vices under a cloak of respectability. I can tolerate anything but humbug, —remember that!"

Mrs. Courtenay winced, but stuck to her guns.

"I'm sure, he's no worse than other men!"—she said—"And he's perfectly devoted to you! It would be much better to be Duchess of Ormistoune, than a poor lonely old maid looking after geniuses. Geniuses are perfectly horrible persons! I've had experience with them. Why, I tried to bring out a violinist once—such a dirty young man, and he smelt terribly of garlic—he came from the Pyrenees—but he was quite a marvellous fiddler—and he turned out most ungratefully, and married my manicurist. Simply shocking! And as for singers!—my dear Maryllia, you never seem to realise what an utter little fright that Cicely Bourne of yours is! She will never get on with a yellow face like that! And *such* a figure!"

Maryllia laughed.

"Well, she's only fourteen——"

"Nonsense!" declared Mrs. Courtenay—"She tells you that—but she's twenty, if she's a day! She's 'doing' you, all

round, and so is that artful old creature Gigue! Taking your money all for nothing!—you may be sure the two of them are in a perfect conspiracy to rob you! I can't imagine why you should go out of your way to pick up such people—really I can't—when you might marry into one of the best positions in England!"

Maryllia was silent. After a pause, she said gently:

"Is there anything else you want to tell me? I'm rather pressed for time,—I have one or two letters to write——"

"Oh, I see you want to get rid of me," and Mrs. Courtenay rose from her chair with a bounce—"You have become so rude lately, Maryllia,—you really have! Your aunt is quite right! But I'm glad you have asked Roxmouth to dine to-night—that is at least one step in the right direction! I'm sure if you will let him say a few words to you alone——"

Maryllia lifted her eyes.

"I have already asked you to drop this subject," she said.

"Well!—if you persist in your obstinacy, you can only blame yourself for losing a good chance,"—said Mrs. Courtenay, with real irritation—"You won't see it, of course, but you're getting very *passée*, Maryllia—and it's only an old friend of your aunt's like myself than can tell you so. I have noticed several wrinkles round your eyes—you should massage with some 'crême ivoire' and tap those lines—you really should—tap on to them so——" and Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay illustrated her instructions delicately on her own pink-and-white dolly face with her finger-tips—"I spend quite an hour every day tapping every line away round my eyes—but you've really got more than I have——"

"I'm not so young as you are, perhaps!" said Maryllia, with a little smile—"But I don't care a bit how I look! If I'm getting old, so is everyone—it's no crime. If we live, we must also die. People who sneer at age are likely to be sneered at themselves when their time comes. And if I'm growing wrinkles, I'd rather have country ones than town ones. See?"

"Dear me, what odd things you do say!" and Mrs. Bludlip

Courtenay shook out her skirts and glanced over her shoulder at her own reflection in a convenient mirror—"You seem to be quite impossible at times——"

"Yes,—Aunt Emily always said so!"—interposed Maryllia, quietly.

"And yet think of the advantages you have had!—the education—the long course of travel!—you should really know the world by this time better than you do!"—went on the irrepressible lady—"You should surely be able to see that there is nothing so good for a woman as a good marriage. Everything in a girl's life points to that end—she is trained for it, dressed for it, brought up to it—and yet here you are with a most brilliant position waiting for you to step into it, and you turn your back upon it with contempt! What do you imagine you can do with yourself down here all alone? There are no people of your own class residing nearer to you than three or four miles distant—the village is composed of vulgar rustics—the rural town is inhabited only by tradespeople, and though one of your near neighbours is Sir Morton Pippitt, one would hardly call him a real gentleman—so there's really nobody at all for *you* to associate with. Now is there?"

Maryllia glanced up, her eyes sparkling.

"You forget the parson!" she said.

"Oh, the parson!" And Mrs. Courtenay tittered. "Well, you're the last woman in the world to associate with a parson! You're not a bit religious!"

"No," said Maryllia—"I'm afraid I'm not!"

"And you couldn't do district visiting and soup kitchens and mothers' meetings,"—put in Mrs. Courtenay—"It would be too sordid and dull for words. In fact, you will simply die of *ennui* down here when the summer is over. Now, if you married Roxmouth——"

"There would be a gall-moon, instead of a honey one," said Maryllia, calmly,—"But there won't be either. I *must* finish my letters! Do you mind leaving me to myself?"

Mrs. Courtenay tossed her head, bit her lip, and rustled out of the room in a huff. She reported her ill-success with

'Maryllia Van' to her husband, who, in his turn, reported it to Lord Roxmouth, who straightway conveyed these and all other items of the progress or retrogression of his wooing to Mrs. Fred Vancourt. That lady, however, felt so perfectly confident that Roxmouth would,—with the romantic surroundings of the Manor, and the exceptional opportunities afforded by long afternoons and moonlit evenings,—succeed where he had hitherto failed, that she almost selected Maryllia's bridal gown, and went so far as to study the most elaborate designs for wedding-cakes of a millionaire description.

"For,"—said she, with comfortable self-assurance—"St. Rest, as I remember it, is just the dullest place I ever heard of, except heaven! There are no men in it except dreadful hunting, drinking provincial creatures who ride or play golf all day, and go to sleep after dinner. That kind of thing will never suit Maryllia. She will contrast Roxmouth with the rural boors, and as a mere matter of good taste, she will acknowledge his superiority. And she will do as I wish in the long run,—she will be Duchess of Ormistoune."

CHAPTER XXII

THE long lazy afternoons of July, full of strong heat and the intense perfume of field-flowers, had never seemed so long and lazy to John Walden as during this particular summer. He felt as if he had nothing in the world to do,—nothing to fill up his life and make it worth living. All his occupations seemed to him very humdrum,—his garden, now ablaze with splendid bloom and colour, looked tawdry, he thought; it had been much prettier in spring-time when the lilac was in blossom. There was not much pleasure in punting,—the river was too glassy and glaring in the sun,—the water dripped greasily from the pole like warm oil—besides, why go punting when there was nobody but one's self to punt? Whether it was his own idle fancy, or a fact, he imagined that the village of St. Rest and its villagers had, in some mysterious way, become separated from him. Everybody in the place, or nearly everybody, had something to do for Miss Vancourt, or else for one or other of Miss Vancourt's guests. Everything went 'up to the Manor'—or came 'down from the Manor'—the village tradespeople were all catering for the Manor—and Mr. Netlips, the grocer, driving himself solemnly over to Riversford one day, came back with a board—'a banner with a strange device'—painted in blue letters on a white ground, which said:

PETROL
STORED HERE.

This startling announcement became a marvel and a fascination to the eyes of the villagers, every one of them coming out of their houses to look at it, directly it was displayed.

"You'll be settin' the 'ouse on fire, Mr. Netlips, I'm afraid," said Mrs. Frost, severely, putting her arms akimbo, and sniffing at the board as though she could smell the spirit it proclaimed—"You don't know nothink about petrol! An' we ain't goin' to have motor-cars often 'ere, please the Lord's goodness!"

Mr. Netlips smiled a superior smile.

"My good woman,"—he said, with his most magisterial air—"if you will kindly manage your own business, which is that of pruning the olive and uprooting the vine, and leave me to manage my establishment as the reversible movement of the age requires, it will be better for the equanimity of the gastritis."

"Good Lord!" and Mrs. Frost threw up her hands—"You're a fine sort of man for a grocer, with your reversibles and your gastritis! What in the world are you talking about?"

Mr. Netlips, busy with the unpacking of a special Stilton cheese which he was about to send 'up to the Manor,' waved her away with one hand.

"I am talking above your head altogether, Mrs. Frost,"—he said, placidly—"I know it! I am aware that my consonances do not tympanise on your brain. Good-afternoon!"

"Petrol Stored Here!"—said Bainton, standing squat before the announcement, as he returned from his day's work—"Hor-hor-hor! Hor-hor! I say, Mr. Netlips, don't blow us all into the middle of next week! Where does ye store it? Out in the coal-shed? It's awful 'spensive, ain't it?"

"It is costly,"—admitted Mr. Netlips, with a grandiose manner, implying that even if it had cost millions he would have been equal to 'stocking' it—"But the travelling aristocrat does not interrogate the lucrative matter."

"Don't he?" and Bainton scratched his head ruminatively. "I s'pose you knows what you means, Mr. Netlips, an' you gen'ally means a lot. Howsomever, I thought you was dead set against aristocrats anyway—your pol'tics was for what

you calls masses,—not classes, nor asses neither. Them was your sentiments not long ago, worn't they?"

Mr. Netlips drew himself up with an air of offended dignity.

"You forestall me wrong, Thomas Bainton,"—he said—"And I prefer not to amplify the conference. A sentiment is no part of a political propinquity."

With that, he retired into the recesses of his 'general store,' leaving Bainton chuckling to himself, with a broad grin on his weatherbeaten countenance.

The 'Petrol' board displayed on the front of Mr. Netlips's shop, however, was just one of those slight indications which showed the vague change that had crept over the erstwhile tranquil atmosphere of St. Rest. Among other signs and tokens of internal disquiet was the increasing pomposity of the village post-mistress, Mrs. Tapple. Mrs. Tapple had grown so accustomed to various titles and prefixes of rank among the different guests who came in turn to stay at the Manor, that whereas she had at one time stood in respectful awe of old Pippitt because he was a 'Sir,' she now regarded him almost with contempt. What was a 'Sir' to a 'Lord'? Nothing!—less than nothing! For during one week she had sold stamps to a real live Marquis and post-cards to a 'Right Honourable,' besides despatching numerous telegrams for the Countess of Beaulyon. By all the gods and little fishes, Sir Morton Pippitt had sunk low indeed!—for when Mrs. Tapple, bridling with scorn, said she 'wondered 'ow a man like 'im, wot only made his money in bone-boilin' would dare to be seen with Miss Vancourt's real quality, it was felt that she was expressing an almost national sentiment.

Taking everything into consideration, it was not to be denied that the new element infused into the little village community, had brought with it a certain stir and excitement, but also a sense of discontent. And John Walden, keenly alive to every touch of feeling, was more conscious of the change than many another man would have been who was

not endowed with so quick and responsive a nature. He noted the quaint self-importance of Mrs. Tapple with a kindly amusement, not altogether unmixed with pain,—he watched regretfully the attempts made by the young girls of his little parish to trick themselves out with cheap finery imported from the town of Riversford, in order to imitate in some fashion, no matter how far distant, the attire of Lady Beaulyon, whose dresses were a wonder, and whose creditors were legion,—and he was sincerely sorry to see that even gentle and pretty Susie Prescott had taken to a new mode of doing her hair, which, though elaborate, did not suit her at all, and gave an almost bold look to an otherwise sweet and maidenly countenance.

"But I am old,—and old-fashioned too!"—he said to himself, resignedly—"The world must move on—and as it moves, it is bound to leave old times behind it—and me with them. I must not complain—nor should I, even in my own heart, find too many reproaches for the ways of the young."

And involuntarily he recalled Tennyson's lines:—

"Only 'dust to dust' for me that sicken at your lawless din,—
Dust in wholesome old-world dust before the newer world begin!"

"'Wholesome old-world dust'!" he mused—"Yes! I think it *was* more wholesome than our too heavily manured soil!"

And a wave of pained regret and yearning arose in him for the days when life was taken more quietly, more earnestly, more soberly—with the trust and love of God inspiring the soul to purity and peace—when to find a woman who was at the same time an atheist, was a thing so abnormal and repulsive as to excite the utmost horror in society. Society! why, now, many women in society were atheists, and made no secret of their shame!

"I must not dwell on these thoughts,"—he said, resolutely, "The sooner I see Brent, the better. I've accepted his

invitation for the last week of this month—I can be spared then for two or three days—indeed, I doubt whether I shall even be missed! The people only want me on Sundays now —and—though I do try not to notice it,—a good many of the congregation are absent from their usual places."

He sighed. He would not admit to himself that it was Maryllia Vancourt—'Maryllia Van'—or rather her guests who had exercised a maleficent influence on his little cure of souls, and that because the 'quality' did not go to church on Sundays, then some of the villagers,—like serfs under the sway of nobles,—stayed away also. He realised that he had given offence to this same 'quality,' by pausing in his reading, when they entered late on the one occasion they did attend divine service,—but he did not care at all for that. He knew that the truth of the mischief wrought by the idle, unthinking upper classes of society, is always precisely what the upper classes do not want to hear;—and he was perfectly aware in his own mind that his short, but explicit sermon, on the 'Soul,' had not been welcome to any one of his aristocratic hearers, while it had been a little over the heads of his own parishioners.

"Mere waste of words!" he mused, with a kind of self-reproach—"I don't know why I chose the text or subject at all. Yes—yes!—I do know! Why do I play the deceiver with myself! She was there—so winsome—so pretty!—and her soul is sweet and pure;—it must be sweet and pure, if it can look out of such clear windows as her eyes. Let all the world go, but keep that soul, I thought!—and so I spoke as I did. But I think she scarcely listened—it was all waste of time, waste of words,—waste of breath! I shall be glad to see dear old Brent again. He wants to talk to me, he says—and I most certainly want to talk to him. After the dinner-party at the Manor, I shall be free. How I dread that party! How I wish I were not going! But I have promised her—and I must not break my word!"

He began to think about one or two matters that to him were not altogether pleasing. Chief among these was the fact that Sir Morton Pippitt had driven over twice now 'to inspect

the church'—accompanied by Lord Roxmouth, and the Reverend 'Putty' Leveson. Once Lord Roxmouth had left his card at the rectory, and had written on it: 'Wishing to have the pleasure of meeting Mr. Walden'—a pleasure which had not, so far, been gratified. Walden understood that Lord Roxmouth was, or intended to be, the future husband of Miss Vancourt. He had learned something of it from Bishop Brent's letter—but now that his lordship was staying as a guest at Badsworth Hall, rumour had spread the statement so very generally that it was an almost accepted fact. Three days had been sufficient to set the village and county talking;—Roxmouth and his tools never did their mischievous work by halves. John Walden accepted the report as others accepted it—only reserving to himself an occasion to ask Miss Vancourt if it were indeed true. Meantime, he kept himself apart from the visitors—he had no wish to meet Lord Roxmouth—though he knew that a meeting was inevitable at the forthcoming dinner-party at Abbot's Manor. Bainton had that dinner-party on his mind as well as his master. He had heard enough of it on all sides. Mrs. Spruce had gabbled of it, saying that 'what with jellies an' ices an' all the things as has to be thought of an' got in ready,' she was 'fair mazed an' moithered.' And she held forth on the subject to one of her favourite cronies, Mrs. Keeley, whose son Bob was still in a state of silent and resentful aggressiveness against the 'quality' for the death of his pet dog.

"It's somethin' too terrible, I do assure you!" she said—"the way these ladies and gentlemen from Lunnon eats fit to bust themselves! When they fust came down, I sez to cook, I sez—'Lord bless 'em, they must 'ave all starved in their own 'omes'—an' she laughed—she 'avin' 'ad 'sperience an' cooked for 'ouse-parties ever since she learned makin' may'nases [mayonnaise] which she sez was when she was twenty, an' she's a round sixty now, an' she sez, 'Lor, no! It do frighten one at first wot they can put into their stummicks, Missis Spruce, but don't you worry—you just get the things, and they'll know how to swaller 'em.' Well, now, Missis Keeley, if you'll b'lieve

me"—and here Mrs. Spruce drew a long breath and began to count on her fingers—"This is 'ow we do every night for the visitors, makin' ready for hextras, in case any gentleman comes along in a motor which isn't expected—fust we 'as horduffs——"

"Save us!" exclaimed Mrs. Keeley—"What's they?"

"Well *I* calls 'em kickshaws, but the right name is horduffs, Primmins sez, bein' a butler he should know the French, an' 'tis a French word, an' it's nothin' but little dishes 'anded round, olives an' anchovies, an' sardines an' messes of every kind, enough to make ye sick to look at 'em—they swallers 'em, an' then we sends in soup—two kinds, white an' clear. They swallers *that*, an' the fish goes in—two kinds—the old Squire never had but one—*that* goes down, an' then comes the hentreys. Them's sometimes two—sometimes four—it just depends on the number we 'as at table. They'se all got French names—there's nothing plain English about *them*. But they'se only bits o' meat an' fowl, done up in different ways with sauces an' vegetables, an' the quality eats 'em up as though they was two bites of an apple. Then we sends in the roast and b'iled—and they takes good cuts off both—then there's game,—now that's nearly allus all eat up, for I like to pick a bone now and then myself if it comes down on a dish an' no one else wants it—but there's never a morsel left for me, I do assure you! Then comes puddings an' sweets—then cheese savouries,—then ices—an' then coffee—an' all the time the wine's a-goin', Primmins sez, every sort, claret, 'ock, chably, champagne,—an' the Lord alone He knows wot their poor insides feels like when 'tis all a-mixin' up together an' workin' round arterwards. But, as I sez, 'tain't no business o' mine if the fash'nables 'as trained their stummicks to be like the ostriches which eats, as I'm told, 'ard iron nails with a relish, I onny know I should a' bin dead an' done with long ago if I put a quarter of the stuff into me which they puts into theirselves, while some of the gentlemen drinks enough whiskey an' soda to drown 'em if 'twas all put in a tub at once——"

"But Miss Vancourt," interrupted Mrs. Keeley, who had been listening to her friend's flow of language in silent wonder,—"She don't eat an' drink like that, do she?"

"Miss Maryllia, bless 'er 'art, sits at her table like a little queen,"—said Mrs. Spruce, with emotion—"Primmins sez she don't eat scarce nothin', an' don't say much neither. She just smiles pretty, an' puts in a word or two, an' then seems lookin' away as if she saw somethink beautiful which nobody else can see. An' that Miss Cicely Bourne, she's just a pickle!—'ow she do play the comic, to be sure!—she ran into the still-room the other day an' danced round like a mad thing, an' took off all the ladies with their airs an' graces till I nearly died o' larfin'! She's a good little thing, though, takin' 'er all round, though a bit odd in 'er way, but that comes of bein' in France an' learnin' music, I expect. But I really must be goin'—there's heaps an' heaps to do, but by an' by we'll have peace an' quiet again—they're all a-goin' next week."

"Well, I sha'n't be sorry!"—and Mrs. Keeley gave a short sigh of satisfaction—"I'm fair sick o' seein' them motor-cars whizzin' through the village makin' such a dust an' smell as never was,—an' I'm sure there's no love lost 'tween Missis Frost an' me, but it do make me worrited like when that there little Ipsie goes runnin' out, not knowin' whether she mayn't be run over like my Bob's pet dog. For the quality don't seem to care for no one 'cept theirselves—an' it ain't peaceful like nor safe as 'twas 'fore they came. An' I s'pose we'll be seein' Miss Maryllia married next?"

Mrs. Spruce pursed up her mouth tightly and looked unutterable things.

"'Tain't no good countin' chickens 'fore they're hatched, Missis Keeley!" she said—"An' the Lord sometimes fixes up marriages in quite a different way to what we expects. There ain't goin' to be no weddin's nor buryin's yet in the Manor, please the A'mighty goodness, for one's as mis'able as t'other, an' both means change, which sometimes is good for the 'elth but most often contrariwise, though whatever

'appens either way we must bend our 'eads under the rod to both. But I mustn't stay chitterin' 'ere any longer—good-day t'ye!"

And nodding darkly as one who could say much an' she would, the worthy woman ambled away.

Scraps of information, such as this talk of Mrs. Spruce's, reached Bainton's ears from time to time in a disjointed and desultory manner and moved him to profound cogitation. He was not quite sure now whether after all, his liking for Miss Vancourt had not been greatly misplaced.

"When I seed her first,"—he said to himself, pathetically, while hoeing the weeds out of the paths in the rectory garden, "When me an' old Josey went up to get 'er to save the Five Sisters, she seemed as sweet as 'oney,—an' she's done [illegible] for the village since. But I don't care for 'er friends. They've cha[illegible]—they've made her forget all about us! An' as for Passon, she don't come nigh 'im no more, an' he don't go nigh 'er. Seems to me 'tis all a muddle an' a racket since the motor-cars went bouncin' about an' smellin' like p'ison—'tain't wot it used to be. Howsomever, let's 'ope to the Lord it'll soon be over! If wot they all sez is true, there'll be a weddin' 'ere soon,—Passon 'll marry Miss Vancourt to the future Dook, an' away they'll go, an' Abbot's Manor 'll be shut up again as it used to afore. An' the onny change we'll 'ave will be Mr. Stanways for agent 'stead of Oliver Leach—which is a blessin'—for Stanways is a decent, kindly man, an' Oliver Leach—well now!" And he paused in his hoeing, fixing his round eyes meditatively on a wall where figs were ripening in the sun—"Blest if I can make out Oliver Leach! One day he's with old Putty Leveson—another he's drunk as a lord in the gutter—an' another he's butterfly huntin' with a net, lookin' like a fool—but allus about the place—allus about—an' he's got a face that a kid would scream at seein' it in the dark. I wish he'd find another situation in a fur-off neighbourhood!"

Here, looking towards the lawn, he saw his master walking slowly up and down on the grass in front of his study window,

with head bent and hands loosely clasped behind his back, apparently lost in thought.

"Passon ain't hisself,—seems all gone to pieces like,' he mused—"He dôn't do nothin' in the garden,—he ain't a bit partikler or fidgetty—an' all he cares about is the bits o' glass which comes on approval from all parts o' the world for the rose-window. I sez to him t'other day—'Ain't ye got enough old glass yet, Passon?'—and he sez all absent-minded like, 'No, Bainton—not yet! There are many difficulties to be conquered—one must have patience. It's almost like piecing a life together,' sez he—'one portion is good—another bad—one's got the true colour—the other's false—and so on—it's hard work to get all the little bits of love an' charity an' kindness to fit into their proper places. Don't you understand?' 'No, Passon,' sez I, 'I can't say as I do!' Then he laughed, but sad like—an' went away with his 'ed down as he's got it now. Something's wrong with him—an' it's all since Miss Vancourt came. She's a real worry to 'im I 'spect,—an' it's true enough the place ain't like what it was a month ago. Yet there's no denyin' she's a sweet little lady for all one can say!"

Bainton's sentiments were a fair reflection of the general village opinion, though in the town of Riversford, the tide of feeling ran high, and controversy raged furiously, over the ways and doings of Miss Vancourt and her society friends. A certain vague awe stole over the gossips, however, when they heard that whether rapid, or non-rapid, 'Maryllia Van' as Sir Morton Pippitt persisted in calling her, was likely to be the future Duchess of Ormistoune. Lord Roxmouth had been seen in Riversford just once, and many shop-girls had declared him 'so distinguished looking!' Mordaunt Appleby, the brewer, had thrown out sundry hints to Sir Morton Pippitt that he 'should be pleased to see his lordship at Appleby House'—Appleby House being the name of his, the brewer's, residence—but somehow his lordship had not yet availed himself of the invitation. Sufficient however was altogether done and said by all concerned, to weave a web of worry round Maryllia,—and to cause her to heartily regret that she

had ever asked any of her London acquaintances down to her house.

"I did it as a kind of instruction to myself,—a lesson and a test," she said—"But I had far better have run the risk of being called an old maid and a recluse than have got these people round me,—all of whom I thought were my friends,—but who have been more or less tampered with by Aunt Emily and Roxmouth, and pressed in to help carry on the old scheme against me of a detestable alliance with a man I hate. Well!—I have learned the falsity of their protestations of liking and admiration and affection for me,—and I'm sorry for it! I should like to believe in the honesty of at least a few persons in the world—if that were possible!—I don't want to have myself always 'on guard' against intrigue and humbug!"

Everyone present, however, on the night of the last dinner-party she gave to her London guests, was bound to admit that a sweeter, fairer creature than its present mistress never trod the old oaken floors of Abbot's Manor; and that even the radiant pictured beauty of 'Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt,' to whom no doubt many a time the Merry Monarch had doffed his plumed hat in salutation, paled and grew dim before the living rose of Maryllia's dainty loveliness and the magnetic tenderness of Maryllia's eyes. Something of the exquisite pensiveness of her mother's countenance, as portrayed in the long-hidden picture which was now one of the gems of the Manor gallery, seemed to soften the outline of her features, and deepen the character and play of the varying expression which made her so fascinating to those who look for the soul in a woman's face, rather than its mere physical form. Lady Beaulyon, beautiful though she was, owed something to art; but Maryllia was nature's own untouched product, and everything about her exhaled freshness, sweetness, and radiant vitality. Roxmouth, entering 'most carefully upon his hour,' namely at a quarter to eight o'clock, found her singularly attractive,—more so, he thought, than he had ever before realised. The stately old-world setting of Abbot's

Manor suited her—the dark oak panelling,—the Flemish tapestries, the worn shields and scutcheons,—the old banners and armorial bearings,—all the numerous touches of the past which spoke of chivalry, ancestral pride and loyalty to great traditions, lent grace and colouring to the picture she herself made, as she received her guests with that sweet kindness, ease and distinction, which are the heritage of race and breeding.

"Pretty little shrew!" he said, in an aside to Marius Longford—"She is really charming,—and I begin to think I want her as much for herself as for her aunt's millions!"

Longford smiled obsequiously.

"There is a certain air of originality, or shall we say individuality, about the lady,"—he observed, with a critical, not to say insolent stare in Maryllia's direction,—"The French term 'beauté du diable' expresses it best. But whether the charm will last, is another question."

"No woman's beauty lasts more than a few years,"—said Roxmouth, as he glanced at the various guests who had entered or were entering. "Lady Beaulyon wears well—but she is forty years old, and begins to show it. Margaret Bludlip Courtenay must be fifty, and she doesn't show it—she manages her Paris cosmetics wonderfully. Some of these county ladies would be better for a little touch of her art! But Maryllia Vancourt needs no paint,—she can afford to be natural. Is that the parson?"

Walden was just entering the room, and Longford put up his glasses.

"Yes,"—he replied—"That is the parson. He is not without character."

Roxmouth became suddenly interested. He saw Walden go up to his hostess and bow—he also saw the sudden smile that brightened Maryllia's face as she welcomed her clerical guest,—the one Churchman of the party.

"Rather a distinguished looking fellow,"—he commented carelessly—"Is he clever?"

Longford hesitated. He had been pulverised in one of the literary weeklies by an article on the authenticity of Shake-

speare's plays, signed boldly 'John Walden,'—and he had learned, by cautious enquiries here and there in London, that though, for the most part, extremely unassuming, the aforesaid John Walden was considered an authority in matters of historical and antiquarian research. But he was naturally anxious that the future Duke of Ormistoune, when he had secured Mrs. Fred Vancourt's millions, should not extend his powerful patronage to a country clergyman who might, from a 'Savage and Savile' point of view, be considered an interloper. So he replied with caution:

"I believe he dabbles a little in literary and archæological pursuits,—many parsons do. As an archæologist, he certainly has merit. You entertain a favourable opinion of the church he has restored?"

"The church, as I have before told you, is perfect,"—replied Roxmouth—"And the man who carried out such a design must needs be an interesting personality. I think Miss Vancourt finds him so!"

His cold grey eyes lightened unpleasantly as he made this remark, and Marius Longford, quick to discern every shade of tone in a voice, recognised a touch of satire in the seemingly casual words. He made no observation, however, but kept his lynx eyes and ears open, watching and listening for anything that might perchance be of use in furthering his patron's desires and aims.

Walden, meanwhile, had, quite unconsciously to himself, created a little sensation by his appearance. *He* was the parson who had dared to stop in his reading of the service because the Manor house-party had entered the church a quarter of an hour behind time,—*he* was the man who had told them that it was no use gaining the whole world if they lost their own souls,—as if, in this advanced era of progress, any one of them had a soul to lose! Preposterous! Here he was, this country cleric, who, as he was introduced by his hostess to the various gentlemen standing immediately about her, smiled urbanely, bowed ceremoniously, and comported himself with an air of intellectual composure and dignity that had a

magnetic effect upon all. Yet in himself he was singularly ill at ease. Various emotions in his mind contended together to make him so. To begin with, he disliked social 'functions' of all kinds, and particularly those at which any noted persons of the so-called 'Smart Set' were present. He disliked women who made capital out of their beauty, by allowing their photographs to be on sale in shop-windows and to appear constantly in cheap pictorials, and of these Lady Beaulyon was a notorious example, to say nothing of the graver sins against morality and principle for which she was renowned. He had no sympathy with sporting or betting men—and he knew by repute that Lord Charlemont and Bludlip Courtenay were of this class. Then again, deep down in his own soul, he resented the fact that Maryllia Vancourt entertained this sort of people as her guests. She was much too good for them, he thought,—she wronged herself by being in their company, or allowing them to be in hers! He watched her as she received part of the 'county' in the Ittlethwaites of Ittlethwaite Park,—with a charming smile of welcome for Bruce Ittlethwaite, a lively young bachelor of sixty, and for his eldest sister Arabella, some ten years younger, a lady whose portly form was attired in a wonderful apple-green satin, trimmed with priceless lace, the latter entirely lost as an article of value, among the misshapen folds of the green gown, which had been created, no doubt, by some local dressmaker, whose ideas were evidently more voluminous than artistic. And presently, as he stood, a quiet spectator of the different types of persons who were mingling with each other in the casual conversation on current topics and events, which always occupies that interval of time known as the 'mauvais quart d'heure' before the announcement of dinner, he happened to look at Maryllia's own dress, and, noticing it more closely, smiled. It was not the first time he had seen that dress!—and a faint colour warmed his cheeks as he remembered the occasion when Mrs. Spruce had sent for him as a 'man o' God' to serve as a witness to her system of unpacking her lady's wardrobe. That was the dress the garrulous old housekeeper had held up in

her arms as though she were a clothes-prop, with the observation, 'It's orful wot the world's a-comin' to—orful! Fancy diamants all sewed on to a gown!' The gown with the 'diamants' was the very one which now clothed Maryllia,—falling over an underskirt of palest pink satin, it glittered softly about her like dew spangles on rose-leaves—and involuntarily Walden thought of the pink shoes he had also seen,—those absurd little shoes!—did she wear them with that fairy-like frock, he wondered? He dared not look towards the floor, lest he should catch a sudden glimpse of the shining points of that ridiculous but fascinating foot-gear that had once so curiously discomposed him. Those shoes might peep out at any moment from under the 'diamants'—with a blink of familiarity which would be, to say the least of it, embarrassing. His reflections were at this juncture interrupted by a smooth voice at his ear.

"How do you do, Mr. Walden?"

A glance showed the speaker to be Mr. Marius Longford, and he responded with brief courtesy.

"Permit me"—continued Mr. Longford—"to introduce you to Lord Roxmouth!"

Walden bowed stiffly.

"I must congratulate you on the beauty of your church, Mr. Walden,"—said Roxmouth, with his usual conventional smile—"I have never seen a finer piece of work. It is not so much a restoration as a creation."

Walden said nothing. He did not particularly care for compliments from Lord Roxmouth.

"That sarcophagus,"—continued his lordship—"was a very singular 'find.' I suppose you have no clue to the possible identity of the saint or sinner whose ashes repose within it?"

"None,"—replied Walden—"Something might probably be discovered if the casket were opened. But that will never happen during my lifetime."

"You would consider it sacrilege, no doubt?" queried Roxmouth, with a tolerant air.

"I should, most certainly!"

"Nonsense, nonsense!" said Sir Morton Pippitt, obtruding himself on the conversation at this moment—"God bless my soul! Not so very long ago every churchyard in England used to have its regular clean out—ha-ha-ha!—all the bones and skulls used to be dug up and thrown together in a charnel house, higgledy-piggledy—and nobody ever talked about sacrilege! You should progress with the age, Mr. Walden!—you should progress! Why shouldn't a coffin be opened as readily as any other box, eh? There's generally nothing inside—ha-ha-ha!—nothing inside worth keeping, ha-ha-ha! The plan of a spring-cleaning for churchyards was an excellent one, I think;—God bless my soul!—why not?—makes room for more bodies and saves extra land being given up to those who are past farming it, except in the way of manure—ha-ha-ha! There's no such thing as sacrilege nowadays, Mr. Walden!—why we've got the photograph of Rameses, taken after a few thousand years' decomposition had set in—ha-ha-ha! And not bad looking—not bad looking!—rather wild about the eyes, that's all—ha-ha! God bless my soul!"

These choice observations of the knight Pippitt were brought to a happy conclusion by the marshalling of the guests in to dinner. Sir Morton, much to his chagrin, found himself deputed to escort Lady Wicketts, whose unwieldy proportions allied to his own, made it difficult for both to pass with proper dignity through the dining-room doorway. A little excited whispering between Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay and Lady Beaulyon took place, as to whether 'Maryllia Van' in her professed detestation of Lord Roxmouth, would forget etiquette and the rule of 'precedence'—but they soon saw she did not intend to so commit herself. For when all her guests had passed in before her, she followed resignedly on the arm of the future Duke. As the greatest stranger, and as the highest in social rank of all present, he had claim to this privilege, and she was too tactful to refuse it.

"What a delightful châtelaine you are!" he murmured, looking down at her as she rested her little gloved hand with

scarce a touch on his arm—"And how proud and glad I am to be once more beside you! Ah, Maryllia, you are very cruel to me! If you would only realise how happy we could be—always together!"

She made no answer. Arriving in the dining-room, she withdrew her hand from his arm, and seated herself at the head of her table. He then found that he was on her right hand, while Lord Charlemont was on her left. Next to Lord Charlemont sat Lady Beaulyon,—and next to Lady Beaulyon John Walden was placed with the partner allotted to him, Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay. On Roxmouth's own side there were Lady Wicketts and Sir Morton Pippitt,—so it chanced that the table was arranged in a manner that brought certain parties who were by no means likely to agree on any one given point, directly opposite to each other. Cicely, peeping out from a little ante-room, where she had entreated to be allowed to stand and watch the proceedings, made a running commentary on this in her own particular fashion. Cicely was looking very picturesque, in a new white frock which Maryllia had given her,—with a broad crimson sash knotted carelessly round her waist and a ribbon of the same colour in her luxuriant black hair. She was to sing after dinner—Gigue had told her she was to 'astonish ze fools'—and she was ready to do it. Her dark eyes shone like stars, and her lips were cherry-red with excitement,—so much so that Mrs. Spruce, thinking she was feverish, had given her a glass of 'cooling cordial'—made of fruit and ice and lemon water, which she was enjoying at intervals while criticising the fine folks in the dining-room.

"Well done, Maryllia!" she murmured, as she saw her friend enter on Roxmouth's arm—"Cold as a ray of the moon, but doing her social duty to the bitter end! What a tom-cat Roxmouth is!—a sleek pussy, sure to snarl if his fur is rubbed up the wrong way—but he is just the type that some women would like to marry—he looks so well-bred. Poor Mr. Walden!—he's got to talk to the Everlasting-Youth lady,—and old Sir Morton Pippitt is 'immediately opposite

to him!—now that's too bad of Maryllia!—it really is! She knows how the bone-boiler longs to boil Mr. Walden's bones, and that Mr. Walden wishes Sir Morton Pippitt were miles away from him! They shouldn't have faced each other. But how very, very superior to all the lot Mr. Walden looks!—he really *is* handsome!—he has such an intellectual head. There's Gigue chattering away to poor old Miss Fosby!—oh dear! Miss Fosby will never understand him! What a motley crew! And I shall have to sing to them all after they've dined! Saint Moses! It will be a sort of 'first appearance in England.' A good test, too, because all the English eat nearly to bursting before they go to the opera. No wonder they never can grasp what the music is about, or who's who! It's all salmon and chicken and lobster and champagne with them—not Beethoven or Wagner or Rossini. Good old Gigue! His spirits are irrepressible! How he is laughing! Mr. Walden looks very serious—almost tragic—I wonder what he is thinking about! I wish I could hear what they are all saying—but it's nothing but buzz, buzz!"

She took a sip at her 'cordial,' watching with artistic appreciation the gay scene in the Manor dining-room—the twinkling lights on the silver and glass and flowers—the elegant dresses of the women,—the jewels that flashed like starbeams on the lovely neck and shoulders of Lady Beaulyon,—the ripples of gold-auburn in Maryllia's hair,—it was a picture that radiated with a thousand colours on the eye and the brain, and was certainly one destined, so far as many of those who formed a part of it were concerned, never to be forgotten. Not that there was anything very remarkable or brilliant in the conversation at the dinner-table,—there never is nowadays. People dine with their friends merely to eat, not to talk. One never by any chance hears so much even as an echo of wit or wisdom. Occasionally a note of scandal is struck,—and more often than not, a questionable anecdote is related, calculated to bring 'a blush to the cheek of the Young Person,' if a Young Person who can blush still exists, and happens to be present. But as a rule, the general

habitude of the dining class is to discourse in a very desultory and inconsequential, not to say stupid, style, and the guests at the Manor proved no exception to the rule. Sir Morton Pippitt fired off bumptious observations at Walden, who paid no heed to them—Bruce Ittlethwaite of Ittlethwaite Park found a congenial spirit in Lord Charlemont, and talked sport right through the repast—and Louis Gigue enlivened the table by a sudden discussion with Mr. Marius Longford, relative to the position of art in Great Britain.

"Mon Dieu!" he exclaimed, with a snap of his fingers—"Ze art is dead en Angleterre,—zere is no musique, no poésie! Zis is ze land of ze A-penny journal—ze musique, ze poésie, ze science, ze politique, ze sentiment,—one A-penny! Bah! Ça, ce n'est pas possible!—zis pauvre pays is kill avec ze vulgarité of ze cheap! Ze people are for ze cheap—for ze photographie, instead of ze picture—ze gramophone, instead of ze artist fingers avec ze brain—et ze littérature—it is ze cheap 'imitation de Zola,' qui obtient les éloges du monde critique à Londres. Vous écrivez?"—and he shook his finger at Longford—"Bien! Écrivez un roman qui est sain, pure et noble—et ze A-penny man vill moque de ça—mais—écrivez of ze dirt of ze human naturel, et voilà! Ze A-penny man say 'Bon! Ah que c'est l'art! Donnez moi l'ordure que je peux sentir! C'est naturel! C'est divin! C'est l'art!"

A murmur, half of laughter, half of shocked protest, went round the table.

"I think," said Mr. Longford, with a pale smile—"that according to the school of the higher criticism, we must admit the natural to be the only divine."

Gigue's rolling eyes gleamed under his shaggy hair.

"Je ne comprends pas!"—he said—"Ven ze pig squeak, c'est naturel—ce n'est pas divin! Ven ze man scratch ze flea, c'est naturel—ce n'est pas divin! Ze art ne désire pas ze picture of ze flea! Ze littérature n'existe pas pour ze squeak of ze pig! Ah, bah! L'art,—c'est l'imagination—l'idéal—c'est le véritable Dieu en l'homme!"

Longford gave vent to a snigger, which was his way of laughing.

"God is an abstract allusion,"—he said—"One does not introduce a non-available quantity in the summing up of facts!"

"Ah! Vous ne croyez pas en Dieu?" And Gigue ruffled up his grey hair with one hand. "Mais—à quoi bon! Ça ne sert rien! Dieu peut exister sans votre croyance, Monsieur!—je vous jure!"

And he laughed—a hearty laugh that was infectious and carried the laughter of everyone else with it. Longford, irritated, turned to his next neighbour with some trite observation, and allowed the discussion to drop. But Walden had heard it, and his heart went out to Gigue for the manner in which he had, for the moment at least, quenched the light of the 'Savage and Savile.'

Up at the end of the table at which he, Walden, sat, things were of rather a strained character. Lord Roxmouth essayed to be witty and conversational, but received so little encouragement in his sallies from Maryllia, that he had to content himself with Lady Wicketts, whom he found a terrible bore. Sir Morton Pippitt, eating heartily of everything, was gradually becoming purple in the face and somnolent under the influence of wine and food,—Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay, tired of trying to 'draw' Walden on sundry topics, got cross and impatient, the more so as she found that he could make himself very charming to the other people in his immediate vicinity, and that, as the dinner proceeded, he 'came out' as it were, very unexpectedly in conversation, and proved himself not only an intellectually brilliant man, but a socially entertaining one. Lord Roxmouth glanced at him curiously from time to time with growing suspicion and disfavour. He was not the kind of subservient, half hypocritical, mock-meek being that is conventionally supposed to represent a country 'cure.' His independent air, his ease of manner, and above all, his intelligence and high culture, were singularly displeasing to Lord Roxmouth, especially as he noticed that Maryllia listened to everything Walden said, and appeared to be more interested in his observations than in

those of anyone else at the table. Exchanging a suggestive glance with Lady Beaulyon, Roxmouth saw that she was taking notes equally with himself on this circumstance, and his already hard face hardened, and grew colder and more inflexible as Walden, with a gaiety and humour irresistibly his own, kept the ball of conversation rolling, and gradually drew to his own strong and magnetic personality, the appreciative attention of nearly all present.

Truth to tell, a sudden exhilaration and excitement had wakened up John's latent forces,—Maryllia's eyes, glancing half timidly, half wistfully at him, and her fair face, slightly troubled in its expression, had moved him to an exertion of his best powers to please her and make everything bright and gay around her. Instinct told him that some secret annoyance fretted her—and watching her looks, and noting the monosyllabic replies she gave to Lord Roxmouth whenever that distinguished personage addressed her, he decided, with a foolish thrill at his heart, that the report of her intended marriage with this nobleman could not be true—she could never look so coldly at anyone she loved! And with this idea paramount in his brain he gave himself up to the humour of the hour—and by and by heads were turned in his direction, and people whispered—'Is that the parson of the parish?'—and when the answer was given in the affirmative, wondering glances were exchanged, and someone at the other end of the table remarked sotto voce:—'Much too brilliant a man for the country!'—whereat Miss Arabella Ittlethwaite bridled up and said she 'hoped nobody thought that town offered the only samples of the human brain worth noticing,' as she would, in that case, 'beg to differ.' Whereat there ensued a lively discussion, which ended, so far as the general experience went, in the decision that clever men were always born or discovered in the country, but that after a while they invariably went up to town, and there became famous.

Presently, the dinner drawing to an end, dessert, coffee and the smoking conveniences for both ladies and gentlemen were handed round,—cigars for the gentlemen, cigarettes for

both gentlemen and ladies. All the women helped themselves to cigarettes, as a matter of course, with the exception of Miss Ittlethwaite,—(who as a 'county' lady of the old school, sat transfixed with horror at the bare idea of being expected to smoke)—poor old Miss Fosby, and Maryllia. And now occurred an incident, in itself trifling, but fraught with strange results to those immediately concerned. Lady Beaulyon was just about to light her own cigarette when, in obedience to a sudden thought that flashed across her brain, she turned her lovely laughing face round towards Walden, and said:

"As there's a clergyman present, I'm sure we ought to ask his permission before we light up! Don't you think it very shocking for women to smoke, Mr. Walden?"

He looked straight at her—his face paling a little with a sense of strongly suppressed feeling.

"I have always been under the impression that English ladies never smoke,"—he said, quietly, with a very slight emphasis on the word 'ladies.' "The rest, of course, must do as they please!"

Had a bombshell suddenly exploded in the dining-room, the effect could hardly have been more stupefying than these words. There was an awful pause. The women, holding the unlit cigarettes delicately between their fingers, looked enquiringly at their hostess. The men stared; Lord Roxmouth laughed.

Maryllia turned white as a snowdrop—but her eyes blazed with sudden amazement, indignation and pride that made lightning in their tender blue. Then,—deliberately choosing a cigarette from the silver box which had been placed on the table before her, she lit it,—and began to puff the smoke from her rosy lips in delicate rings, turning to Lord Roxmouth as she did so with a playful word and smile. It was enough;—the 'lead' was given. A glance of approval went the round of her London lady guests—who, exonerated by her prompt action from all responsibility, lighted their cigarettes without further ado, and the room was soon misty with tobacco fumes. Not a word was addressed to Walden,—a sudden mantle of fog seemed to have fallen over him, covering him up from the

consciousness of the company, for no one even glanced at him, except covertly,—no one appeared to have heard or noticed his remark. Lord Charlemont looked, as he felt, distressed. In his heart he admired Walden for his boldness in speaking out frankly against a modern habit of women which he also considered reprehensible,—but at the same time he recognised that the reproof had perhaps been administered too openly. Walden himself sat rigid and very pale—he fully realised what he had done,—and he knew he was being snubbed for it—but he did not care.

"Better so!"—he said to himself, in an inward rage—"Better that I should never see her again than see her as she is now! She wrongs herself!—and I cannot be a silent witness of her wrong, even though it is wrought by her own hand!"

The buzz of talk now grew more loud and incessant;—he saw Sir Morton Pippitt's round eyes fixed upon him with an astonished and derisive stare,—and he longed for the moment to come when he might escape from the whole smoking, chattering party. All that his own eyes consciously beheld was Maryllia—Maryllia, the dainty, pretty, delicate feminine creature who seemed created out of the finest mortal and spiritual essences,—smoking! That cigarette stuck in her pretty mouth, vulgarised her appearance at once,—coarsened her—made her look as if she were indeed the rapid 'Maryllia Van' his friend Bishop Brent had written of. What did he care if not a soul at that table ever spoke to him again? Nothing! But he cared—oh, he cared greatly for any roughening touch on that little figure of smooth white and rose flesh, which somehow he had, unconsciously to himself, set in a niche for thoughts higher than common! He was quite aware that he had committed a social error, yet he was sorry she could not have reproved him in some other fashion than that of deliberately doing what he had just contemned as unbecoming to a lady. And his mind was in a whirl, when at last she rose to give the signal to adjourn, passing out of the dining-room without a glance in his direction.

The moment she had vanished, he at once prepared to leave,

not only the room, but the house. No one offered to detain him. The men were all too conscious of what they considered his 'faux pas'—and they were also made rather uncomfortable by the decided rebuff he had received from their hostess. Yet they all liked him, and were, in their way, sorry for what had occurred. Lord Roxmouth, with the easy assurance of one who is conscious of his own position, remarked with kindly banter:—

"Won't you stay with us, Mr. Walden? Are you obliged to go?"

Walden looked at him unflinchingly, yet with a smile.

"When a man elects to speak his mind, Lord Roxmouth, his room is better than his company!"

And with this he left them—to laugh at him if they chose—caring little whether they did or not. Passing into the hall, he took his hat and coat,—he was angry with himself, yet not ashamed,—for something in his soul told him that he had done rightly, even as a minister of the Gospel, to utter a protest against the vulgarising of womanhood. He stepped out into the courtyard—the moon was rising, and the air was very sweet and cool.

"I was wrong!"—he said, half aloud—"And yet I was right! I should not have said what I did,—and yet I should! If no man is ever bold enough to protest against the voluntary and fast-increasing self-degradation of women, then men will be most to blame if the next generation of wives and mothers are shameless, unsexed, indecorous, and wholly unworthy of their life's mission. How angry she looked! Possibly she will never speak to me again. Well, what does it matter! The wider apart our paths are set, the better!"

He reached the gate of the courtyard, and was about to pass through it, when a little fluttering figure in white, with crimson in its rough dark hair, rushed after him. It was Cicely.

"Don't go, please Mr. Walden!" she said, breathlessly; and he saw, even by the light of the moon, that her eyes were wet—"Please don't go! Maryllia wishes to speak to you."

He turned a pale, composed face upon her.

"Where?"

"In the picture-gallery. She is alone there. She saw you cross the courtyard, and sent me after you. All the other people are in the drawing-room, waiting to hear me sing—and I must run, for Gigue is there, and he is so impatient! Please, Mr. Walden!"—and Cicely's voice shook—"Please don't mind if Maryllia is angry! She *is* angry! But it's all on the surface—she doesn't really mean it—she wouldn't be unkind for all the world! I know what you said,—I was watching the dinner-party from the ante-room—and I saw everything—and—and—I think you were just splendid!—it's horrid for women to smoke—but they nearly all do it nowadays—only I never saw Maryllia do it before, and oh, Mr. Walden, make it all right with her, please!"

For a moment John hesitated. Then a kind smile softened his features.

"I can't quite promise that, Cicely,—but I'll do my best!" And taking her hand he patted it gently, as she furtively dashed one or two tear-drops from her lashes—"Come, come, you mustn't cry! Run away and sing like the little nightingale you are—don't fret——"

"But you'll go to Maryllia, won't you?" she urged, anxiously.

"Yes. I'll go!"

She lifted her dark eyes, and he saw how true and full of soul they were, despite their witch-like wildness and passion. Just then a stormy passage of music, played on the piano, and tumbling out, as it seemed, on the air through the open windows of the Manor drawing-room, reminded her that she was being waited for by her impetuous and impatient maestro.

"That's the signal for me!" she said—"I must run! But oh do, do make it up with Maryllia and be friends!"

She rushed away. He waited till she had disappeared, then turning back through the courtyard, slowly re-entered the house.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE lights were burning low and dimly in the picture-gallery when he entered it and saw Maryllia there, pacing restlessly up and down, the folds of her dress with the 'diamants' sparkling around her as she moved, like a million little drops of frost on gossamer, while her small head, lifted proudly on its slim arched throat, seemed to his heated fancy, as though crowned with fresh coronals of gold woven from the summer sun. Turning, she confronted him and paused irresolute,—then, with a sudden impulsive gesture, came forward swiftly,—her cheeks flaming crimson,—her lips trembling, and her bosom heaving with its quickened breath like that of a fluttered bird.

"How dare you!" she said, in a low, strained voice—"How dare you!"

He met her eyes,—and in that moment individual and personal considerations were swept aside, and only the Right and the Wrong presented themselves to his mental vision, like witnesses from a higher world, invisible but omnipotent, waiting for the result of the first clash of combat between two human souls. Yielding to his own over-mastering emotion, and reckless of consequences, he caught her two hands lightly in his own.

"And how dare *you*!" he said, earnestly,—"Little girl, how dare *you* so hurt yourself!"

They gazed upon one another,—each one secretly amazed at the other's outbreak of feeling,—she grown white and speechless,—he with a swift strong sense of his own power and

authority as a mere man, nerving him to the utterance of truth for her sake—for her sake!—regardless of all forms and ceremonies. Then he dropped her hands as quickly as he had grasped them.

"Forgive me!" he said, very softly,—and paused, till recovering more of his self-possession, he continued quietly—"You should not have sent for me, Miss Vancourt! Knowing that I had offended you, I was leaving your house, never intending to enter it again. Why did you summon me back? To reproach me? It would be kinder to spare me this, and let me go my own way!"

He waited for her to speak. But she was silent. Anger, humiliation and wounded pride, mingled with a certain struggling respect and admiration for his boldness, held her mute. She little knew how provocatively lovely she looked as she stood haughtily immovable, her eyes alone flashing eloquent rebellion;—she little guessed that John committed the picture of her fairness to the innermost recording cells of his brain, there to be stored up preciously, and never forgotten.

"I am sorry,"—he resumed—"that I spoke as I did just now at your table—because you are angry with me. But I cannot say that I am sorry for any other reason——"

At this Maryllia found her voice suddenly.

"You have insulted my guests——"

"Ah, no!" said John, almost with a smile—"Women who are habitual smokers are not easily insulted! They are past that, believe me! The fine susceptibilities which one might otherwise attribute to them have been long ago blunted. They do not command respect, and naturally, they can scarcely expect to receive it."

"I do not agree with you!" retorted Maryllia, with rising warmth, as she regained her self-control, and with it her deep sense of irritation—"You were rude,—and rudeness is unpardonable! You said as much as to imply that none of the women present were ladies——"

"None of those who smoked were!"—said John, coolly.

"Mr. Walden! I myself, smoked!"

"You did,"—and he moved a step or two nearer to her, his whole face lighting up with keen emotion—"And why did you? The motive was intended to be courteous—but the principle was wrong!"

"Wrong!" she echoed, angrily—"Wrong?"

"Yes—wrong! Have you never been told that you can do one thing wrong among so many that you do right, Miss Vancourt?" he asked, with great gentleness—"You had it in your power to show your true womanliness by refusing to smoke,—you could, in your position as hostess, have saved your women friends from making fools of themselves—yes—the word is out, and I don't apologise for it!"—here a sudden smile kindled in his fine eyes—"And you could also have given them all an example of obedience."

"Obedience!" exclaimed Maryllia, astonished,—"What do you mean? Obedience to whom?"

"To me!" replied John, with perfect composure.

She gazed at him, scarcely believing she had heard aright.

"To you?" she repeated—"To you?"

"Why certainly!" said John, wondering even as he spoke at his own ease and self-assurance—"As minister of the parish I am the only person here that is set in authority over you—and the first thing you do is to defy me!"

His manner was whimsical and kindly,—his tone of voice playfully tender, as though he were speaking to some naughty child whom, notwithstanding its temper, he loved too well to scold,—and Maryllia was completely taken aback by this unexpected method of treating her combative humour. Her pretty mouth opened like a rosebud,—she seemed as though she would speak, but only an inarticulate murmur came from her parted lips; while the very faintest lurking suspicion of a smile crept dimpling over her face, to be lost again in the hostile expression of her eyes.

"You say I was rude,"—he went on,—"If I was, need you have been rude too?"

She found utterance quickly.

"I was not rude——" she began.

"Pardon me,—you were! Rude to me—and still more rude to yourself! The last was the worst affront, in my opinion!"

"I do not understand you," she said, impatiently—"Your ideas of women are not those of the present day——"

"Thank God, they are not!" he replied—"I am glad to be in that respect, old-fashioned! You say you do not understand me. Now that is not true! You do understand! You know very well that if I was rude in my *un*premeditated speech, you were much more rude in your premeditated act!—that of deliberately spoiling your womanly self by doing what you know in your own heart was—will you forgive me the word?—unwomanly!"

Maryllia flushed red.

"There is no harm in smoking," she said, coldly;—"it is quite the usual thing nowadays for ladies to enjoy their cigarettes. Why should they not? It is nothing new. Spanish women have always smoked—Austrian and Italian women smoke freely without any adverse comment—in fact, the custom is almost universal. English women have been the last, certainly, to adopt it—but then, England is always behind every country in everything!"

She spoke with a hard flippancy,—and she knew it. Walden's eyes darkened into a deeper gravity.

"Miss Vancourt, this England of ours was once upon a time not behind, but *before* every nation in the whole world for the sweetness, purity and modesty of its women! That it has become one with less enlightened races in the deliberate unsexing and degradation of womanhood does not now, and will not in the future, redound to its credit. But I am prolonging a discussion uselessly,—" He waited a moment. "I shall trouble you no more with my opinions, believe me,—nor shall I ever again intrude my presence upon yourself or your guests,"—he continued, slowly,—"As I have already said, I am sorry to have offended *you*,—but I am not sorry to have spoken my mind! I do not care a jot what your friends from London think of me or say of me,—their criticism, good or

bad, is to me a matter of absolute indifference—but I had thought—I had hoped——"

He paused,—his voice for the moment failing him. Maryllia looked at his pale, earnest face, and a sudden sense of shamed compunction smote her heart. Her anger was fast cooling down,—and with the swift change of mood which made her so variable and bewitching, she said, more gently:

"Well, Mr. Walden? You thought—you hoped?"

"That we might be friends,"—he answered, quietly—"But I see plainly that is impossible!"

She was silent. He stood very still,—his eyes wandering involuntarily to the painted beauty of 'Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt,' which he had admired and studied so often for many lonely years, and back again along the dimly lit gallery to that unveiled portrait of the young bride who never came home, the mother of the little proud creature who confronted him with such fairy-like stateliness and pretty assertion of her small self in combat against him, and upon whom his glance finally rested with a lingering sadness and pain. Then he said in a low tone:

"Good-night, Miss Vancourt—good-bye!"

At this a cloud of distress swept across her mobile features. "There now!" she said to herself—"He's going away and he'll never come to the Manor any more! I intended to make him quite ashamed of himself—and he isn't a bit! So like a man! He'd rather die than own himself in the wrong—besides he *isn't* wrong,—oh dear!—he mustn't go away in a huff!"

And with a sudden yielding sweetness and grace of action of which she was quite unconscious, she extended her hands to him;—

"Oh, no, Mr. Walden!" she said, earnestly—"I am not so angry as all that! Not good-bye!"

Hardly knowing what he did, he took her offered hands and held them tenderly in his own.

"Not good-bye!" she said, trembling a little, and flushing rose-red with a certain embarrassment—"I don't really want

to quarrel—I don't indeed! We—we were getting on so nicely together—and it is so seldom one *can* get on with a clergyman!"—here she began to laugh—"But you know it was dreadful of you, wasn't it?—at any rate it sounded dreadful—when you said that English ladies never smoked——"

"Neither they do,"—declared John resolutely, yet smilingly, "Except by way of defiance!"

She glanced up at him,—and the mirthful sparkle in his eyes was reflected in her own.

"You are very obstinate!" she said, as she drew her hands away from his—"But I suppose you really do think smoking is wrong for women?"

His heart was beating, his pulses thrilling under the influence of her touch, her appealing look and sudden change of manner,—but he was not to be moved from his convictions, though all the world should swim round him in a glamour of blue eyes and gold hair.

"I think so, most certainly!"

"But why?"

He hesitated.

"Well, the act of smoking in itself is not wrong—but the associations of the habit are unfit for womanhood. I know very well that it has become usual in England for ladies to smoke,—most unfortunately!—but there are many habits and customs in this country as well as in others, which, because they are habitual, are not the less, but rather the more, pernicious. I confess to a strong prejudice against smoking women."

"But men smoke—why should not women smoke also?" persisted Maryllia.

Walden heard this plea with smiling patience.

"Men,—a very large majority of them too—habitually get drunk. Do you think it justifiable for women to get drunk by way of following the men's example?"

"Why no, of course not!"—she answered quickly—"But drunkenness is a vice——"

"So is smoking! And it is quite as unhealthy as all vices

are. There have been more addle-pated statesmen and politicians in England since smoking became a daily necessity with them than were ever known before. I don't believe in any human being who turns his brain into a chimney. And I—pardon me!—when *you* deliberately put that cigarette in your mouth——"

"Well!" and a mischievous dimple appeared on each soft cheek as she looked up—"What did you think of me? Now be perfectly frank!"

"I will!" he said, slowly, with an earnest gravity darkening in his eyes—"I should not be your true friend if I were otherwise! But if I tell you what I thought—and what I may say I know from long experience all honest Englishmen think when they see a woman smoking—you must exonerate me in your mind and understand that my thoughts were only momentary. I knew that your better, sweeter self would soon reassert its sway!"

Her head drooped a little—she was quite silent.

"I thought,"—he went on,—"when I saw you actually smoking, that something strange and unnatural had happened to you!—that you had become, in some pitiful way, a different woman from the one that walked with me, not so long ago, and showed me her old French damask roses blossoming in the border,"—he paused an instant, his voice faltering a little,—then he resumed, quietly and firmly—"and that you had, against all nature's best intentions for you, descended to the level of Lady Beaulyon——"

She interrupted him by a quick gesture——

"Eva Beaulyon is my friend, Mr. Walden!"

"No—not your friend!"—he said steadily—"Forgive me! You asked me to speak frankly. She is a friend to none except those of her own particular class and type——"

"To which I also belong,"—said Maryllia, with a sudden flash of returning rebellion—"You know I do!"

"I know you do *not*!" replied Walden, with some heat—"And I thank God for it! I know you are no more of her class and type than the wood lily is like the rank and

poisonous marsh weed! Oh, child!—why do you wrong yourself! If I am too blunt and plain in what I say to you, let me cease speaking—but if you ask *me* as your friend—as your minister,"—and he emphasised the word—"to tell you honestly my opinion, have patience with my roughness!"

"You are not rough," she murmured,—and a little contraction in her throat warned her of the possible rising of tears—"But you are scarcely tolerant!"

"I cannot be tolerant of the demoralisation of womanhood!"—he said, passionately—"I cannot look on with an easy smile when I see the sex that *should* be the saving purity of the world, deliberately sinking itself by its own free will and choice into the mire of the vulgarest social vice, and parting with every redeeming grace, modesty and virtue that once made it sacred and beautiful! I am quite aware that there are many men who not only look on, but even encourage this world-wide debasement of women in order to bring them down on a par with themselves—but I am not one of these. I know that when women cease to be womanly, then the sorrows of the world, already heavy, will be doubled and trebled! When men come to be ashamed of their mothers—as many of them are to-day—there will be but little hope of good for future generations! And the fact that there are many women of title and position like your guest, Lady Beaulyon, who deliberately drag their husbands' honour through the dust and publicly glory in their own disgrace, does not make their crime the less, but rather the more criminal. You know this as well as I do! You are not of Lady Beaulyon's class or type—if you were, I should not waste one moment of my time in your presence!"

She gazed at him speechlessly. And now from the drawing-room came the sound of Cicely's voice, clear, powerful, and as sweet as legends tell us the voices of the angels are—

"Luna fedel, tu chiama
  Col raggio ed io col suon,
La fulgida mia dama
  Sul gotico veron!"

"You know,"—he went on impetuously—"You know I told you before that I am not a society man. I said that if I came to dinner to meet your London friends, I should be very much in the way. You have found me so. A man of my age and of my settled habits and convictions ought to avoid society altogether. It is not possible for him to accommodate himself to it. For instance,—see how old-fashioned and strait-laced I am!—I wish I had been miles away from St. Rest before I had even seen you smoking! It is a trifle, perhaps,—but it is one of those trifles which stick in the memory and embitter the mind!"

Around them the air seemed to break and divide into pulsations of melody as Cicely sang:

"Diro che sei d'argente
  D'opale, d'ambra e d'or,
Diro che incanti il vento,
  E che innamori i fior!"

"You have seemed to me such an ideal of English womanhood!"—he went on dreamily, hardly aware how far his words were carrying him—"The sweet and fitting mistress of this dear old house, richly endowed as it is with noblest memories of the noble dead! Their proud and tender spirit has looked out of your eyes—or so I have fancied;—and you are naturally so kind and gentle—you have been so good to the people in the village,—they all love you—they all wish to think well of you;—for you have proved yourself practically as well as emotionally sympathetic to them. And, above all things, you have appeared so pre-eminently delicate and dainty in your tastes—so maidenly!—I should as soon have expected to see the Greek Psyche smoking as you!"

She took a swift step towards him, and laid her hand on his arm.

"Can't you forget it?" she said.

He looked at her. Her eyes were humid, and her lips trembled a little.

"Forget what?" he asked gently.

"That I smoked!"

He hesitated a second.

"I will try!"

"You see,"—went on Maryllia, coaxingly—"we shall have to live in the same parish, and we shall be compelled to meet each other often—and it would never do for you to be always thinking of that cigarette! Now would it?"

He was silent. The little hand on his arm gave an insistent pressure.

"Of course when you conjure up such an awful picture as Psyche smoking, I know just how you feel about it!" And her eyes sparkled up at him with an arch look which, fortunately for his peace of mind, his own eyes did not meet,—"And naturally you must hold very strong opinions on the subject,—dreadfully strong! But then—nobody has ever thought me at all like Psyche before—so you see—you see! . . ." She paused, and John began to feel his heart beating uncomfortably fast. "It's very nice to be compared with Psyche anyhow!—and of course she would look impossible and awful with a cigarette in her mouth! I quite understand! She couldn't smoke,—she wouldn't!—and—and—*I* won't! I won't really! You won't believe me, I expect,—but I assure you, I never smoke! I only did it this evening, because,—because,—well!—because I thought I ought to defend my own sex against your censure—and also perhaps—perhaps out of a little bit of bravado! But, I'm sorry! There! Will you forgive me?"

Nearly, very nearly, John lost his head. Maryllia had used the strongest weapon in all woman's armoury,—humility,—and he went down before it, completely overwhelmed and conquered. A swirl of emotion swept over him,—his brain grew dizzy, and for a moment he saw nothing in earth or heaven but the sweet upturned face, the soft caressing eyes, the graceful yielding form clad in its diaphanous draperies of jewelled gossamer,—then pulling himself together with a strong effort which made him well-nigh tremble, he took the small hand that lay in white confidence on his arm, and raised it to his lips with a grave, courtly, almost cold reverence.

"It is you to forgive *me*, Miss Vancourt!"—he said, unsteadily, "For I am quite aware that I committed a breach of social etiquette at your table,—and—and—I know I have taken considerable liberty in speaking my mind to you as I have done. Even as your minister I fear I have overstepped my privileges——"

"Oh, please don't apologise!" said Maryllia, quickly——"It's all over, you know! You've said your say, and I've said mine—and I'm sure we both feel better for it. Don't we?"

John smiled, but his face was very pale, and his eyes were troubled. He was absorbed in the problem of his own struggling emotions—how to master them—how to keep them back from breaking into passionate speech,—and her bewitching, childlike air, half penitent, half mischievous, was making sad havoc of his self-possession.

"We are friends again now,"—she went on—"And really,—really we *must* try and keep so!"

This, with a quaint little nod of emphatic decision.

"Do you think it will be difficult?" he asked, looking at her more earnestly and tenderly than he himself was aware of.

She laughed, and blushed a little.

"I don't know!—it may be!" she said—"You see you've twice ruffled me up the wrong way! I was very angry—oh, very angry indeed, when you coolly stopped the service because we all came in late that Sunday,—and to-night I was very angry again——"

"But I was *not* angry!" said John, simply—"And it takes two to make a quarrel!"

She peeped at him from under her long lashes and again the fleeting blush swept over her fair face.

"I must go now!"—she said—"Won't you come into the drawing-room?—just to hear Cicely sing at her very best?"

"Not to-night,"—he answered quickly—"If you will excuse me——"

"Of course I will excuse you!" and she smiled—"I know you don't like company."

"I very much *dis*like it!" he said, emphatically—"But then I'm quite an unsociable person. You see I've lived alone here for ten years——"

"And you want to go on living alone for another ten years—I see!" said Maryllia—"Well! So you shall! I promise I won't interfere!"

He looked at her half appealingly.

"I don't think you understand,"—he said,—then paused.

"Oh yes, I understand perfectly!" And she smiled radiantly. "You like to be left quite to yourself, with your books and flowers, and the bits of glass for the rose-window in the church. By the bye, I must help you with that rose-window! I will get you some genuine old pieces—and if I find any very rare specimens of mediæval blue or crimson you'll be so pleased that you'll forget all about that cigarette—you know you will!"

"Miss Vancourt,"—he began earnestly—"if you will only believe that it is because I think so highly of you——because you have seemed to me so much above the mere society woman that I——I——"

"I know!" she said, very softly—"I quite see your point of view!"

"You are not of the modern world,"—he went on, slowly—"Not in your heart—not in your real tastes and sentiments;—not yet, though you may possibly be forced to become one with it after your marriage——"

"And when will that be?" she interrupted him, smiling.

His clear, calm blue eyes rested upon her gravely and searchingly.

"Soon surely,—if report be true!"

"Really? Well, you ought to know whether the date has been fixed yet,"—she said, very demurely—"Because, of course *you'll* have to marry me!"

Something swayed and rocked in John's brain, making the ground he stood upon swerve and seem unsteady. A wave

of colour flushed his bronzed face up to the very roots of his grey-brown hair. Maryllia watched him with prettily critical interest, much as a kitten watches the rolling out of a ball of worsted on which it has just placed its little furry paw. Hurriedly he sought in his mind for something to say.

"I——I——don't quite understand,"—he murmured.

"Don't you?" and she smiled upon him blandly—"Surely you wouldn't expect me to be married in any church but yours, or by any clergyman but you?"

"Oh, I see!" And Maryllia mentally commented—'So do I!'—while he heaved a sigh unconsciously, but whether of relief or pain it was impossible to tell. Looking up, he met her eyes,—so deep and blue, so strangely compassionate and tender! A faint smile trembled on her lips.

"Good-night, Mr. Walden!"

"Good-night!" he said; then suddenly yielding to the emotion which mastered him, he made one swift step to her side—"You will forgive me, I know!—you will think of me presently with kindness, and with patience for my old-fashioned ways!—and you will do me the justice to believe that if I seemed rude to your guests, as you say I was, it was all for your sake!—because I thought you deserved more respect from them than that they should smoke in your presence,—and also, because I felt—I could not help feeling that if your father had been alive he would not have allowed them to do so,—he would have been too precious of you,—too careful that nothing of an indecorous or unwomanly nature should ever be associated with you;——and——and——I spoke as I did because it seemed to me that someone *should* speak!—someone of years and authority, who from the point of experience alone, might defend you from the contact of modern vulgarity;—so——so——I said the first words that came to me——just as your father might have said them!——yes!——just as your father might have spoken,—for you—you know you seem little more than a child to me!—I am so much older than you are, God help me!"

Stooping, he caught her hands and kissed them with a passion of which he was entirely unconscious,—then turned swiftly from her and was gone.

She stood where he had left her, trembling a little, but with a startled radiance in her eyes that made them doubly beautiful. She was pale to the lips;—her hands,—the hands he had kissed, were burning. Suddenly, on an impulse which she could not have explained to herself, she ran swiftly out of the picture-gallery and into the hall where,—as the great oaken door stood open to the summer night,—she could see the whole flower-garlanded square of the Tudor court, gleaming like polished silver in the intense radiance of the moon. John Walden was walking quickly across it,—she watched him, and saw him all at once pause near the old stone dial which at this season of the year was almost hidden by the clambering white roses that grew around it. He took off his hat and passed his hand over his brows with an air of dejection and fatigue,—the moonlight fell full on the clear contour of his features,—and she drew herself and her sparkling draperies well back into the deep shadow of the portal lest he should catch a glimpse of her, and, perhaps,—so seeing her, return—

"And that would never do!" she thought, with a little tremor of fear running through her which was unaccountably delicious;—"I'm sure it wouldn't!——not to-night!"

The air was very warm and sultry,—all the windows of the Manor were thrown open for coolness,—and through those of the drawing-room came the lovely vibrations of Cicely's pure fresh voice. She was singing an enchanting melody on which some words of Julian Adderley's, simple and quaint, without having any claim to particular poetic merit, floated clearly with distinct and perfect enunciation—

"A little rose on a young rose-tree
Shed all its crimson blood for me,
Drop by drop on the dewy grass,
Its petals fell, and its life did pass;—
Oh little rose on the young rose-tree,
Why did you shed your blood for me?

A nightingale in a tall pine-tree,
Broke its heart in a song for me,
Singing, with moonbeams around it spread,
It fluttered, and fell at my threshold, dead;—
Oh nightingale in the tall pine-tree,
Why did you break your heart for me?

A lover of ladies, bold and free,
Challenged the world to a fight for me,
But I scorn'd his love in a foolish pride,
And, sword in hand, he fighting died!
Oh lover of ladies, bold and free,
Why did you lose your life for me?"

And again, with plaintive insistence, the last two lines were repeated, ringing out on the deep stillness of the summer night—

"*Oh lover of ladies, bold and free,*
Why did you lose your life for me?"

The song ceased with a clash of chords. It was followed by a subdued clapping of hands,—a pause of silence—and then a renewed murmur of conversation. Walden looked up as if suddenly startled from a reverie, and resumed his quick pace across the courtyard,—and Maryllia, seeing him go, advanced a little more into the gleaming moonlight to follow him with her eyes till he should quite disappear.

"Upon my word, a very quaint little comedy!" said a coldly mocking voice behind her—"A modern Juliet gazing pathetically after the retiring form of a somewhat elderly clerical Romeo! Let me congratulate you, Miss Maryllia, on your newest and most brilliant achievement,—the conquest of a country parson! It is quite worthy of you!"

And turning, she confronted Lord Roxmouth.

CHAPTER XXIV

FOR a moment they looked at each other. The smile on Roxmouth's face widened.

"Come, come, Maryllia!" he said, easily—"Don't be foolish! The airs of a tragedy queen do not suit you. I assure you I haven't the least objection to your amusing yourself with a parson, if you like! The conversation in the picture-gallery just now was quite idyllic—all about a cigarette and Psyche! Really it was most absurd!—and the little sermon of the enamoured clergyman to his pretty penitent was as unique as it was priggish. I'm sure you must have been vastly entertained! And the final allusion he made to his age —*that* was a masterstroke of pathos!—or bathos? Which? Du sublime au ridicule il n'y'a qu'un pas, Madame!"

Her eyes were fixed unswervingly upon him.

"So you listened!" she said.

"Naturally! One always listens to a comedy if it is played well. I've been listening all the evening. I've listened to your waif and stray, Cicely Bourne, and am perfectly willing to admit that she is worth the training you are giving her. It's the first time I've heard her sing to advantage. I've listened to Eva Beaulyon's involved explanation of a perfectly unworkable scheme for the education of country yokels (who never do anything with education when they get it), on which she is going to extract twenty thousand pounds for herself from the pockets of her newest millionaire-victim. I've listened to the Bludlip Courtenay -woman's enthusiastic description of a new specific for the eradication of wrinkles

and crowsfeet. I've listened to that old bore Sir Morton Pippitt, and to the afflicting county gossip of the lady in green,—Miss Ittlethwaite is her name, I believe. And, getting tired of these things, I strolled towards the picture-gallery, and hearing your delightful voice, listened there. I confess I heard more than I expected!"

Without a word in response, she turned from him and began to move away. He stretched out a hand and caught her sleeve.

"Maryllia, wait! I must speak to you—and I may as well say what I have to say now and get it over."

She paused. Lifting her eyes she glanced at him with a look of utter scorn and contempt. He laughed.

"Come out into the moonlight!"—he said—"Come and walk with me in this romantic old courtyard. It suits you, and you suit it. You are very pretty, Maryllia! May I—notwithstanding the parson—smoke?"

She said nothing. Drawing a leather case from his pocket, he took a cigar out and lit it.

"Silence gives consent,"—he went on—"Besides I'm sure you don't mind. You know plenty of men who can never talk comfortably without puffing smoke in between whiles. I'm one of that sort. Don't look at me like Cleopatra deprived of Marc Antony. Be reasonable! I only want to say a few plain matter-of-fact words to you——"

"Say them then as quickly as possible, please,"—she replied—"I am *not* a good listener!"

"No? Now I should have thought you were, judging by the patience with which you endured the parson's general discursiveness. What a superb night!" He stepped from the portal out on the old flagstones of the courtyard. "Take just one turn with me, Maryllia!"

Quietly, and with an air of cold composure she came to him, and walked slowly at his side. He looked at her covertly, yet critically.

"I won't make love to you,"—he said presently, with a smile—"because you tell me you don't like it. I will merely

put a case before you and ask for your opinion! Have I your permission?"

She bent her head slightly. Her throat was dry,—her heart was beating painfully,—she knew Roxmouth's crafty and treacherous nature, and her whole soul sickened as she realised that now he could, if he chose, drag the name of John Walden through a mire of social mud, and hold it up to ridicule among his own particular 'set,' who would certainly lose no time in blackening it with their ever-ready tar-brush. And it was all through her—all through her! How would she ever forgive herself if his austere and honourable reputation were touched in ever so slight a degree by a breath of scandal? Unconsciously, she clasped her little hands and wrung them hard—Roxmouth saw the action, and quickly fathomed the inward suffering it indicated.

"You know my dearest ambition,"—he went on,—"and I need not emphasise it. It is to call you my wife. If you consent to marry me, you take at once a high position in the society to which you naturally belong. But you tell me I am detestable to you—and that you would rather die than accept me as a husband. I confess I do not understand your attitude,—and, if you will allow me to say so, I hardly think you understand it yourself. You are in a state of uncertainty—most women live always in that state;—and your vacillating soul like a bewildered butterfly—you see I am copying the clerical example by dropping into poetry!—and a butterfly, *not* a cigarette, is I believe the correct emblem of Psyche,—" here he took a whiff at his cigar, and smiled pleasantly—"your soul, I repeat, like a bewildered butterfly, has lighted by chance on a full-flowering parson. The flight—the pause on that maturely-grown blossom of piety, is pardonable,—but I cannot contemplate with pleasure the idea of your compromising your name with that of this sentimental middle-aged individual who, though he may be an excellent Churchman, would make rather a grotesque lover!"

She remained silent. Glancing sideways at her, he wondered whether it was the moonlight that made her look so set and pale.

"But I said I would put a case before you,"—he continued, "and I will. Here are you,—of an age to be married. Here am I,—anxious to marry you. We are neither of us growing younger,—and delay seems foolish. I offer you all I am worth in the world—myself, my name and my position. You have refused me a score of times, and I am not discouraged—you refuse me still, and I am not baffled. But I ask why? I am not deformed or idiotic. I would try to make you happy. A woman is best when she has entirely her own way,—I would let you have yours. You would be free to follow your own whims and caprices. Provided you gave me lawful heirs, I should ask no more of you. No reasonable man ought to ask more of any reasonable woman. Life could be made very enjoyable to us both, with a little tact and sense on either side. I should amuse myself in the world, and so I hope, would you. We understand modern life and appreciate its conveniences. The freedom of the matrimonial state is one of those conveniences, of which I am sure we should equally take advantage."

He puffed at his cigar for a few minutes complacently.

"You profess to hate me,"—he went on—"Again I ask, why? You tell your aunt that you want to be 'loved.' You consider love the only lasting good of life. Well, you have your desire. *I* love you!"

She raised her eyes,—and then suddenly laughed.

"You!" she said—"You 'love' me? It must be a very piecemeal sort of love, then, for I know at least five women to whom you have said the same thing!"

He was in nowise disconcerted.

"Only five!" he murmured lazily—"Why not ten—or twenty? The more the merrier! Women delight in bragging of conquests they have never made, as why should they not? Lying comes so naturally to them! But I do not profess to be a saint,—I daresay I have said 'I love you' to a hundred women in a certain fashion,—but not as I say it to you. When I say it to you, I mean it."

"Mean what?" she asked.

"Love."

She stopped in her walk and faced him.

"When a man loves a woman—really loves her,"—she said, "Does he persecute her? Does he compromise her in society? Does he try to scandalise her among her friends? Does he whisper her name away on a false rumour, and accuse her of running after him for his title, while all the time he knows it is he himself that is running after her money? Does he make her life a misery to her, and leave her no peace anywhere, not even in her own house? Does he spy upon her, and set others to do the same?—does he listen at doors and interrogate servants as to her movements—and does he altogether play the dastardly traitor to prove his 'love'?"

Her voice shook—her eyes were ablaze with indignation. Roxmouth flicked a little ash off his cigar.

"Why, of course not!" he replied—"But who does these dreadful things? Are they done at all except in your imagination?"

"*You* do them!" said Maryllia, passionately—"And you have always done them! When I tell you once and for all that I have given up every chance I ever had of being my aunt's heiress—that I shall never be a rich woman,—and that I would far rather die a beggar than be your wife, will you not understand me?—will you not leave me alone?"

He looked at her with quizzical amusement.

"Do you really want to be left alone?" he asked—"Or in a 'solitude à deux'—with the parson?"

She was silent, though her silence cost her an effort. But she knew that the least word she might say concerning Walden would be wilfully misconstrued. She knew that Roxmouth was waiting for her to burst out with some indignant denial of his suggestions—something that he might twist and turn in his own fashion and repeat afterwards to all his and her acquaintances. She cared nothing for herself, but she was full of dread lest Walden's name should be bandied up and down on the scurrilous tongues of that 'upper class' throng, who, because they spend their lives in nothing nobler than political

intrigue and sensual indulgence, are politely set aside as froth and scum by the saner, cleaner world, and classified as the 'Smart Set.' Roxmouth watched her furtively His clear-cut face, white skin and sandy hair shone all together with an oily lustre in the moonlight;—there was a hard cold gleam in his eyes.

"It would be a pretty little story for the society press," he said, after a pause—"How the bewitching Maryllia Vancourt resigned the brilliancy of her social life for a dream of love with an elderly country clergyman! By Heaven! No one would believe it! But,"—and he waited a minute, then continued—"It's a story that shall never be told so far as I am concerned—if—" He broke off, and looked meditatively at the end of his cigar. "There is always an 'if'—unfortunately!"

Maryllia smiled coldly.

"That is a threat,"—she said—"But it does not affect me! Nothing that you can do or say will make me consent to marry you. You have slandered me already—you can slander me again for all I care. But I will never be your wife."

"You have said so before,"—he observed, placidly—"And I have put the question many times—why?"

She looked at him steadily.

"Shall I tell you?"

"Do! I shall appreciate the favour!"

For a moment she hesitated. A great pain and sorrow clouded her eyes.

"No woman marries a leper by choice!"—she said at last, slowly.

He glanced at her,—then shrugged his shoulders.

"You talk in parables. Pardon me if I am too dull to understand you!"

"You understand me well enough,"—she answered—"But if you wish it, I will speak more plainly. I dream of love——"

"Most women do!" he interrupted her, smilingly—"And I am sure you dream charmingly. But is a middle-aged parson part of the romantic vision?"

She paid no heed to this sarcasm. She had moved a pace or two away from him, and now stood, her head slightly uplifted, her eyes turned wistfully towards the picturesque gables of the Manor outlined clearly in the moon against the dense night sky.

"I dream of love!"—she repeated softly,—while he, smoking tranquilly, and looking the very image of a tailor's model in his faultlessly cut dress suit, spotless shirt front, and aggressively neat white tie, studied her face, her figure and her attitude with amused interest—"But my dream is not what the world offers me as the dream's realisation! The love that I mean—the love that I seek—the love that I want—the love that I will have,"—and she raised her hand involuntarily with a slight gesture which almost implied a command—"or else go loveless all my days—is an honest love,—loyal, true and pure!—and strong enough to last through this life and all the lives to come!"

"If there are any!"—interpolated Roxmouth, blandly.

She looked at him,—and a vague expression of something like physical repulsion flitted across her face.

"It is no use talking to you,"—she said—"For you believe in nothing—not even in God! You are a man of your own making—you are not a man in the true sense of manhood. How can you know anything of love? You will not find it in the low haunts of Paris where you are so well known,—where your name is a byword as that of an English 'milord' who degrades his Order!"

"What do *you* know of the low haunts of Paris?" he queried with a cold laugh—"Is Louis Gigue your informant?"

"I daresay Louis Gigue knows as much of you as most men do,"—she replied, quietly—"But I never speak of you to him. Indeed, I never speak of you at all unless you are spoken of, and not always then. You do not interest me sufficiently!"

She moved towards the house. He followed her.

"Your remarks have been somewhat rambling and disjointed,"—he said—"But essentially feminine, after all. And

they merely tend to one thing—that you are still an untamed shrew!"

She looked back at him over her shoulder. Her eyes gleamed in the moonlight,—a faint smile curved her pretty mouth.

"If I am, it will need someone braver than you are to tame me!" she said—"A trickster is always a coward!"

With an angry exclamation he flung away the end of his cigar,—it fell into a harmless bed of mignonette and seared the sweet blossom, burning redly in the green like a wicked eye. And then he caught her hand firmly and held it grasped as in a vice.

"You insult me!" he said, thickly—"And I shall not forget it! You talk as a child talks—though you are no child! You are a woman of the world—you have travelled—you have had experience—and you know men. You are perfectly aware that the sentimental 'love' you speak of exists nowhere except in poems and story-books—you know that no sane man alive would tie himself to one woman save for the law's demand that his heirs shall be lawfully born. You are no shrinking maid in her teens, that you should start and recoil or blush at the truth of the position, and it is the merest affectation on your part to talk about 'love lasting for ever,' for you are perfectly aware that it cannot last very long over the honeymoon. The natural state of man is polygamous. Englishmen are the same as Turks or Hottentots in this respect, except for the saving grace of hypocrisy, which is the chief prop of European civilisation. If it were not for hypocrisy, we should all be savages as utterly and completely as in primæval days! You know all this as well as I do—and yet you feign to desire the impossible, while all the time you play the fool with a country parson! But I'll make you pay for it—by Heaven, I will! You scorn me and my name—you call me a social leper——"

"You are one!" she said, wrenching her hand from his clasp—"And what is more, you know it, and you glory in it! Who are your associates? Men who are physically or morally

degenerate—women who, so long as their appetites are satisfied, seek nothing more! You play the patron to a certain literary 'set' who produce books unfit to be read by any decent human being,—you work your way, by means of your title and position, through society, contaminating everything you touch! You contaminate *me* by associating my name with yours!—and my aunt helps you in the wicked scheme! I came here to my own home—to the house where my father died—thinking that perhaps here at least I should find peace,"—and her voice shook as with tears—"that here, at least, the old walls might give me shelter and protection!—but even here you followed me with your paid spy, Marius Longford—and I have found myself surrounded by your base tools almost despite myself! But even if you try to hound me into my grave, I will never marry you! I would rather die a hundred times over than be your wife!"

His face flushed a dark red, and he suddenly made as though he would seize her in his arms. She retreated swiftly.

"Do not touch me!" she said, in a low, strained voice—"It will be the worse for you if you do!"

"The worse for me—or for *you*?" he muttered fiercely,—then regaining his composure, he burst into an angry laugh. "Bah! You are nothing but a woman! You fling aside what you have, and pine for what you have not! The old, old story! The eternal feminine!"

She made no reply, but moved on towards the house.

"Quel ravissement de la lune!" exclaimed a deep guttural voice at this juncture, and Louis Gigue came out from the dark embrasure of the Manor's oaken portal into the full splendour of the moonlight—"Et la belle Mademoiselle Vancourt is ze adorable fantôme of ze night! Et milord Roxmouth ze what-you-call?—ze gnome!—ze shadow of ze lumière! Ha-ha! C'est joli, zat little chanson of ze little rose-tree! Ze music, c'est une inspiration de Cicely—and ze words are not so melancolique as ze love-songs made ordinairement en Angleterre! Oui—oui!—c'est joli!"

He turned his shrewd old face up to the sky, and blinked

at the dim stars,—there was a smile under his grizzled moustache. He had interrupted the conversation between his hostess and her objectionable wooer precisely at the right moment, and he knew it. Roxmouth's pale face grew a shade paler, but he made a very good assumption of perfect composure, and taking out his case of cigars offered one to Gigue, who cheerfully accepted it. Then he lit one for himself with a hand that trembled slightly. Maryllia, pausing on the step of the porch as she was about to enter, turned her head back towards him for a moment.

"Are you staying long at Badsworth Hall?" she asked.

"About a fortnight or three weeks,"—he answered carelessly, "Mr. Longford is doing some literary work and needs the quiet of the country—and Sir Morton Pippitt is good enough to wish us to extend our visit."

He smiled as he spoke. She said nothing further, but slowly passed into the house. Gigue at once began to walk up and down the courtyard, smoking vigorously, and talking volubly concerning the future of his pupil Cicely Bourne, and the triumph she would make some two years hence as a 'prima donna assoluta,' far greater than Patti ever was in her palmiest days,—and Roxmouth was perforce compelled, out of civility, as well as immediate diplomacy, to listen to him with some show of interest.

"Do you think an artistic career a good thing for a woman?" he asked, with a slight touch of satire in his voice as he put the question.

Gigue glanced up at him quickly and comprehendingly.

"Ah, bah! Pour une femme il n'y'a qu'une chose—l'Amour!" he replied—"Mais—au même temps—l'Art c'est mieux qu'un mariage de convenance!"

Roxmouth shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly, smiled tolerantly, and changed the subject.

That same evening, when everyone had retired to bed, and when Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay was carefully taking off her artistically woven 'real hair' eyebrows and putting them by in a box for the night, Lady Beaulyon, arrayed in a marvellous 'deshabille'

of lace and pale blue satin, which would have been called by the up-to-date modiste 'a dream of cerulean sweetness,' came into her room with dejection visibly written on her photographically valuable features.

"It's all over, Pipkin!" she said, with a sigh,—Pipkin was the poetic pet-name by which the 'beauty' of the press-paragraphist addressed her Ever-Youthful friend,—"We shall never get a penny out of Mrs. Fred Vancourt. Maryllia is a mule! She has told me as plainly as politeness will allow her to do that she does not intend to know either you or me any more after we have left here—and you know we're off to-morrow. So to-morrow ends the acquaintance. That girl's 'cheek' is beyond words! One would think she was an empress, instead of being a little bounder with only an old Manor-house and certainly not more than two thousand a year in her own right!"

'Pipkin' stared. That she was destitute of eyebrows, save for a few iron-grey bristles where eyebrows should have been, and that her beautiful Titian hair was lying dishevelled on her dressing-table, were facts entirely lost sight of in the stupefaction of the moment.

"Maryllia Vancourt does not intend to know US!" she ejaculated,—"Nonsense, Eva! The girl must be mad!"

"Mad or sane, that's what she says,"—and Eva Beaulyon turned away from the spectacle of her semi-bald and eyebrowless confidante with a species of sudden irritation and repulsion—"She declares we are in the pay of her aunt and Lord Roxmouth. So we are, more or less! And what does it matter! Money must be had—and whatever way there is of getting it should be taken. I laughed at her, and told her quite frankly that I would do anything for money,—flatter a millionaire one day and cut him the next, if I could get cheques for doing both. How in the world should I get on without money?—or you either? But she is an incorrigible little idiot—talks about honour and principle exactly like some mediæval story-book. She declares she will never speak to either of us again after we've gone away

to-morrow. Of course we can easily reverse the position and turn the tables upon her by saying *we* will not speak to her again. That will be easy enough—for I believe she's after the parson!"

Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay's eyes lightened with malignity.

"What, that man who objected to our smoke?"

Lady Beaulyon nodded.

"And I think Roxmouth sees it!"—she added.

'Pipkin' looked weirdly meditative and curiously wizened for a moment. Then she suddenly laughed and clapped her hands.

"That will do!" she exclaimed—"That's quite good enough for US! Mrs. Fred will pay for *that* information! Don't you see?"

Lady Beaulyon shook her head.

"Don't you? Well, wait till we get back to town!"—and 'Pipkin' took up her false hair and shook it gently, as she spoke—"We can do wonders—wonders, I tell you, Eva! And till we go, we'll be as nice to the girl as we can,—go off good friends and all that sort of thing—tell her how much we've enjoyed ourselves—thank her profusely,—and then once away we'll tell Mrs. Fred all about John Walden, and leave her to do as she likes with the story. That will be quite enough! If Maryllia has any sneaking liking for the man, she'll do anything to save *his* name if she doesn't care about saving her own!"

"Oh, I see now!" and Lady Beaulyon's eyes sparkled up with a gleam of malice—"Yes—I quite understand!"

'Pipkin' danced about the room in ecstasy,—she was half undressed for the night, and showed a pair of exceedingly thin old legs under an exceedingly short young petticoat.

"Maryllia Vancourt and a country parson!" she exclaimed, "The whole thing is *too* delicious! Go to bed, Eva! Get your beauty sleep or you'll have ever so many more wrinkles than you need! Good-night, dearest! If Maryllia declines to know *us*, we shall soon find excellent reasons for not knowing *her*! Good-night!"

With a shrill little laugh, the lady kissed her dear friend affectionately—and if the caress was not returned with very great fervour, it may be presumed that this coldness was due more to the unlovely impression created by the night 'toilette' of the Ever-Youthful one, than anything else. Anyway the two social schemers parted on the most cordial terms, and retired to their several couches with an edifying sense of virtue pervading them both morally and physically.

And while they and others in the Manor were sleeping, Maryllia lay broad awake, watching the moonbeams creeping about her room like thin silver threads, interlacing every object in a network of pale luminance,—and listening to the slow tick-tock of the rusty timepiece in the courtyard which said, 'Give all—take nothing—give—all—take—no—thing!'—with such steady and monotonous persistence. She was sad yet happy,—perplexed, yet peaceful;—she had decided on her own course of action, and though that course involved some immediate vexation and inconvenience to herself, she was satisfied that it was the only one possible to adopt under the irritating circumstances by which she was hemmed in and surrounded.

"It will be best for everyone concerned,"—she said, with a sigh—"Of course it upsets all my plans and spoils my whole summer,—but it is the only thing to do—the wisest and safest, both for—for Mr. Walden—and for me. I should be a very poor friend if I could not sacrifice myself and my own pleasure to save him from possible annoyance,—and though it *is* a little hard—yes!—it *is* hard!—it can't be helped, and I must go through with it. 'Home, Home, sweet Home!' Yes—dear old Home!—you shall not be darkened by a shadow of deceit or treachery if *I* can prevent it!—and for the present, my way is the only way!"

One or two tears glittered on her long lashes when she at last fell into a light slumber, and the old pendulum's rusty voice croaking out: 'Give all—take no—thing' echoed hoarsely through her dreams like a harsh command which it was more or less difficult to obey. But life, as we all know, is not made up of great events so much as of irritating trifles,—

poor, wretched, apparently insignificant trifles, which, nevertheless do so act upon our destinies sometimes as to put everything out of gear, and make havoc and confusion where there should be nothing but peace. It was the merest trifle that Sir Morton Pippitt should have brought his 'distinguished guests,' including Marius Longford, to see John Walden's church—and also have taken him to visit Maryllia in her own home;—it was equally trifling that Longford, improving on the knightly Bone-Melter's acquaintance, should have chosen to import Lord Roxmouth into the neighbourhood through the convenient precincts of Badsworth Hall;—it was a trifle that Maryllia should have actually believed in the good faith of two women who had formerly entertained her at their own houses and whose hospitality she was anxious to return;—and it was a trifle that John Walden should, so to speak, have made a conventionally social 'slip' in his protest against smoking women;——but there the trifles stopped. Maryllia knew well enough that only the very strongest feeling, the very deepest and most intense emotion could have made the quiet, self-contained 'man o' God' as Mrs. Spruce called him, speak to her as he had done,—and she also knew that only the most bitter malice and cruel under-intent to do mischief could have roused Roxmouth, usually so coldly self-centred, to the white heat of wrath which had blazed out of him that evening. Between these two men she stood—a quite worthless object of regard, so she assured herself,—through her, one of them was like to have his name torn to shreds in the foul mouths of up-to-date salacious slanderers,—and likewise through her, the other was prepared and ready to commit himself to any kind of lie, any sort of treachery, in order to gain his own interested ends. Small wonder that tears rose to her eyes even in sleep —and that in an uneasy and confused dream she saw John Walden standing in his garden near the lilac-tree from which he had once given her a spray,—and that he turned upon her a sad white face, furrowed with pain and grief, while he said in weary accents—"Why have you troubled my peace? I was so happy till you came!" And she cried out—"Oh, let me

go away! No one wants me! I have never been loved much in all my life—but I am loving enough not to wish to give pain to my friends—let me go away from my dear old home and never come back again, rather than make you wretched!"

And then with a cry she awoke, shivering and half-sobbing, to feel herself the loneliest of little mortals—to long impotently for her father's touch, her father's kiss,—to pray to that dimly-radiant phantom of her mother's loveliness which was pictured on her brain, and anon to stretch out her pretty rounded arms with a soft cry of mingled tenderness and pain—"Oh, I am so sorry!—so sorry for *him*! I know he is unhappy!—and it's all my fault! I wish——I wish——"

But what she wished she could not express, even to herself. Her sensitive nature was keenly alive to every slight impression of kindness or of coldness;—and the intense longing for love, which had been the pulse of her inmost being since her earliest infancy, and which had filled her with such passionate devotion to her father that her grief at his loss had been almost abnormally profound and despairing, made her feel poignantly every little incident which emphasised, or seemed to emphasise, her own utter loneliness in the world; and she was just now strung up to such a nervous tension, that she would almost have consented to wed Lord Roxmouth if by so doing she could have saved any possible mischief occurring to John Walden through Roxmouth's malignancy. But the shuddering physical repulsion she felt at the bare contemplation of such a marriage was too strong for her.

"Anything but that!"—she said to herself, with something of a prayer—"O dear God!—anything but that!"

Sometimes God hears these little petitions which are not of the orthodox Church. Sometimes, as it seems, by a strange chance, the cry of a helpless and innocent soul does reach that vast Profound where all the secrets of life and destiny lie hidden in mysterious embryo. And thus it happens that across the din and bustle of our petty striving and restless disquietudes there is struck a sudden great silence, by way of answer,—sometimes it is the silence of Death which ends all sorrow,—

sometimes it is the sweeter silence of Love which turns sorrow into joy.

Next day all the guests at the Manor had departed with the exception of three—Louis Gigue, and the 'Sisters Gemini,' namely, Lady Wicketts and Miss Fosby. With much gush and gratitude for a 'charming stay—a delightful time!' Lady Beaulyon and Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay took leave of their 'dear Maryllia' who received their farewells and embraces with an irresponsively civil coldness. Lord Charlemont and Mr. Bludlip Courtenay 'motored' to London, undertaking with each other to keep up a speed of fifty miles an hour, provided there were not too many hills and not too much 'slowing down' for the benefit of unexpected policemen round corners. And at sunset, a pleasant peace and stillness settled on the Manor grounds, erstwhile disturbed by groups of restless persons walking aimlessly to and fro,—persons who picked flowers merely to throw them away again, and played tennis and croquet only to become quarrelsome and declare that the weather was much too hot for games. Everybody that was anybody had gone their ways,—and within her own domicile Mrs. Spruce breathed capaciously and freely, and said in confidence to the cook and to Primmins:

"Thank the Lord an' His mercies, that's all over! An' from what I hears, Miss Maryllia won't be wantin' no more London folks for a goodish bit o' time, an' we'll all 'ave peace to turn round an' look at ourselves an' find out whether we're sane or silly, for the two old leddies what is stayin' on give no trouble at all, an' that Mr. Gigg don't care what he gets, so long as he can bang away on the pianner an' make Miss Cicely sing, an' I will own she do sing lovely like the angels in a 'evenly 'ost, but there!—*I* don't want no more company, for what with French maids an' valets, all talkin' the wickedest stuff I ever heard about the ways an' doins o' their masters an' missises in London, I'm downright glad to be rid o' the whole lot! For do what we will, there is limits to patience, an' a peaceful life is what suits me best, not knowin' for the past three weeks whether my 'ead or my 'eels is uppermost with the orderin' an'

messin' about, though I will say Miss Maryllia knows what's what, an' ain't never in a fuss nor muddle, keepin' all wages an' bills paid reg'ler like a hoffice clerk, mebbe better, for one never knows whether clerks pays out what they're told or keeps some by in their own pockets, honesty not bein' always policy with the likes o' they. Anyway 'ere we are all alive an' none the worse for the bustle, which is a mercy, an' now mebbe we'll have time to think a bit as we go, an' stop worritin' over plates an' dishes an' glass an' silver, which, say what we like, do sit on one like a burden when there's a many to serve. A bit o' quiet 'ull do us all good!"

The 'quiet' she thus eulogised was to be longer and lonelier than she imagined, but of this she knew nothing. The whole house was delightfully tranquil after the departure of the visitors, and the spirit of a grateful repose seemed to have imparted itself to its few remaining occupants. Louis Gigue played wonderful improvisations on the piano that evening, and Cicely sang so brilliantly and ravishingly that had she then stood on the boards of the Paris Grand Opera, she would have created a wild 'furore.' Lady Wicketts knitted placidly; she was making a counterpane, which no doubt someone would reluctantly decide to sleep under—and Miss Fosby embroidered a cushion cover for Lady Wicketts, who already possessed many of these articles wrought by the same hand. Maryllia occupied herself in writing many letters,—and all was peace. Nothing in any way betokened a change, or suggested the slightest interruption to the sun-lighted serenity of the long, lovely summer days.

CHAPTER XXV

WHATEVER the feelings of John Walden were concerning the incidents that had led him to more or less give himself away, as the saying goes, into Maryllia's hands, he remained happily unconscious of the fact that Lord Roxmouth had overheard his interview with her in the picture-gallery—and being a man who never brooded over his own particular small vexations and annoyances, he had determined, as far as might be possible, to put the whole incident behind him, as it were, and try to forget it. Of course he knew he never could forget it,—he knew that the sweet look in Maryllia's eyes—the little appealing touch of her hand on his arm, would be perchance the most vivid impressions of his life till that life should be ended. But it was useless to dwell with heart-aching persistence on her fascination, or on what he now called his own utter foolishness, and he was glad that he had arranged to visit his old friend Bishop Brent, as this enabled him to go away at once for three or four days. And it was possible, so he argued with himself, that this three or four days' break of the magnetic charm that had, against his own wish and will, enslaved his thoughts and senses, would restore him to that state of self-poise and philosophic tranquillity in which he had for so many years found an almost, if not quite, perfect happiness. Bracing himself fully up to the determination that he would, at all hazards, make an effort to recover his lost peace, he made rapid preparations for his departure from St. Rest, and going the round of his parish, he let all whom it might concern know, that for the

first time in a long ten years, he was about to take two or three days' holiday. The announcement was received by some with good-natured surprise—by others with incredulity—but by most, with the usual comfortable resignation to circumstances which is such a prevailing characteristic of the rustic mind.

"It'll do ye good, Passon, that it will!" said Mrs. Frost, in her high acidulated voice, which by dint of constant scolding and screaming after her young family had become almost raspish—"For you're looking that white about the gills that it upsets my mind to see it. I sez to Adam onny t'other day, 'You'll be diggin' a grave for Passon presently—see if you don't—for he's runnin' downhill as fast as a loaded barrow with naught ahint it.' That's what I said, Passon—an' its Gospel true!"

Walden smiled.

"You're quite right, Mrs. Frost,"—he said, patiently—"I am certainly going downhill, as you say—but I must try to put a little check on the wheels! There's one thing to be said about it, if Adam digs my grave, as it is likely he will, I know he will do it better than any other sexton in the county! I shall sleep in it well, and securely!"

Mrs. Frost felt a certain sense of pride in this remark.

"You may say that, Passon—you may say that and not be fur wrong,"—she said, complacently—"Adam don't do much, but what he doos is well done, an' there's no mistake about it. If I 'adn't a known 'im to be a 'andy man in his trade he wouldn't 'a had me to wife, I do assure you!"

Walden smiled and passed on. To Mr. Netlips, the grocer, he confided a few orders for the household supplies during his absence, which that worthy and sapient personage accepted with due attention.

"It is a demonstrable dispensation, Mr. Walden, sir,"—he said, "that you should be preparing yourself for locomotion at the moment when the house-party at the Manor is also severed indistinguishably. There is no one there now, so my imparted information relates, with the exception of her

ladyship Wicketts, a Miss Fosby and a hired musician from the cells of the professional caterer, named Gigg."

Walden's eyes twinkled. He was always very indulgent to Mr. Netlips, and rather encouraged him than otherwise in his own special flow of language.

"Really!" he said—"And so they are all gone! I'm afraid it will make a difference to your trade, Mr. Netlips! How about your Petrol storage?"

Mr. Netlips smiled, with a comfortable air of self-conscious wisdom.

"It has been absorbed—quite absorbed," he said, complacently—"The board of announcement was prospective, not penetrative. Orders were consumed in rotation, and his lordship Charlemont was the last applicant on the formula."

"I see!" said Walden—"So you are no loser by the transaction. I'm glad to hear it! Good-day! I only intend to be away a short time. You will scarcely miss me,—as I shall occupy my usual post on Sunday."

"Your forethought, Mr. Walden, sir, is of a most high complication,"—rejoined Mr. Netlips with a gracious bend of his fat neck—"And it is not to be regretted by the profane that you should rotate with the world, provided you are seen in strict adhesion to the pulpit on the acceptable seventh day. Otherwise, it is but natural that you should preamble for health's sake. You have been looking poorly, Mr. Walden, sir, of late; I trust you will beneficially profit by change."

Walden thanked him, and went his way. His spirits were gradually rising—he was relieved to hear that Maryllia's house-party had broken up and dispersed, and he cogitated within himself as to whether he should go and say good-bye to her before leaving the village, or just let things remain as they were. He was a little uncertain as to which was the wisest course to adopt,—and while he was yet thinking about it he passed the cottage of old Josey Letherbarrow, and saw the old man sitting at his door peacefully smoking, while at his feet, Ipsie Frost was curled up comfortably like a kitten, busying herself in tying garlands of ivy and honeysuckle round the tops

of his big coarsely-laced boots. Pausing, John leaned on the gate and looked at the two with a smile.

"Ullo, Passon!" said Ipsie, turning her blue eyes up at him with a confidential air—"Tum an' tie up my Zozey-Posey! Zozey-Posey's bin naughty,—he's dot to be tied up so he tan't move!"

"And when he's good again, what then?" said Walden—"Will you untie him?"

Ipsie stared roundly and meditatively.

"Dunno!"—she said—"'Specks I will! But oh, my Zozey-Posey *is* so bad!" and she screwed her little flaxen head round with an expression of the most comical distress—"See my wip?" And she held up a long stem of golden-rod in flower,—"Zozey dot to be wipped—poor Zozey! But he's dot to be tied up fust!"

Josey heard all this nonsense babble with delighted interest, and surveyed the tops of his decorated boots with much admiration.

"Ain't she a little caution!" he said—"She do mind me somehow of th' owld Squire's gel! Ay, she do!—Miss Maryllia was just as peart and dauntsome when she was her age. Did I ever tell ye, Passon, 'bout Miss Maryllia's legs an' the wopses' nest?"

John started violently. What was the old man talking about? He felt that he must immediately put a stop to any chance of indecorous garrulity.

"No, you never told me anything about it, Josey,"—he said, hastily,—"and I've no time just now to stay and listen. I'm off on a visit for two or three days—you won't see me again till Sunday."

Josey drew his pipe slowly out of his mouth.

"Goin' away, Passon, are ye?" he said in quavering accents of surprise—"Ain't that a bit strange like?"

"Why yes, I suppose it is,"—said John, half laughing—"I never do go away I know—but——"

"Look 'ere, Passon! Speak frank an' fair!—there baint nothin' drivin' ye away, be there?"

The hot colour sprang to Walden's brows.

"Why no, Josey!—of course not! How can you think of such a thing?"

Josey stooped and patted Ipsie's flaxen tangle of curls softly. Then he straightened himself and looked fully into John's face.

"Well I dunno how 'tis, Passon,"—he said, slowly—"When the body gets old an' feels the fallin' o' the dark shadder, the soul begins to feel young, an' sees all at once the light a-comin' which makes all things clear. See this little child playin' wi' me?—well, she don't think o' me as an old worn man, but as somethin' young like herself—an' for why? Because she sees the soul o' me,—the eyes o' the children see souls more'n bodies, if ye leave 'em alone an' don't worrit 'em wi' worldly talk. An' it's *my* soul wot sees more'n my body—an' that's why I sez to ye, Passon, that if so be you've any trouble don't run away from it! Stay an' fight it out—it's the onny way!—fight it out!"

Walden was for a moment taken aback. Then he answered steadily.

"You're right, Josey! If I had any trouble I should stay and as you say, fight it out;—but I've none, Josey!—none in the world! I am as happy as I can be,—far happier than I deserve,—and I'm only going away to see my old friend Bishop Brent—you remember—the Bishop who consecrated the church seven years ago?"—Josey nodded comprehensively, "He lives, as you know, quite a hundred miles from here—but I shall be in my usual place on Sunday."

"Please God, you will!" said Josey, devoutly—"And please God, so shall I. But there's never no knowin' what may 'appen in a day or two days——"

Here Ipsie gave vent to a yell of delight. She had been groping among the flowers in the cottage border, and now held up a deep red rose, darkly glowing at its centre.

"Wed wose!" she announced, screamingly—"Wed—all wed! For Passon! Passon, tiss it!"

John, still leaning on the gate, reached down and took the

flower, kissing it as he was told, with lips that trembled on the velvet leaves. It was one of the 'old French damask' roses—and its rich scent, so soft and full of inexplicable fine delicacy, affected him strangely.

"'Ave ye heard as 'ow Miss Maryllia's goin' to marry that fine gen'leman wot's at Badsworth?" pursued Josey, presently, beginning to chuckle as he asked the question—"Roxmouth, they calls him;—Lord, Lord, what clicketin' talk, like all the grass-'oppers out for a fairin'! *She* ain't goin' to marry no Roxmouths, bless 'er 'art!—she's goin' to stick to the old 'ome an' people, and never leave 'em no more! *I* knows her mind! She tells old Josey wot she don't tell nobody else, you bet she do!"

John Walden tried not to look interested.

"Miss Vancourt will no doubt marry some day,"—he said, somewhat lamely.

"Av coorse she will!"—returned Josey—"When Mr. Right comes along, she'll know 'im fast enough! Them blue eyes ain't goin' to be deceived, *I* tell ye! But she ain't goin' to be no Duchess as they sez,—it's my 'pinion plain Missis is good 'nough for the Squire's gel, if so be a lovin' an' true Mister was to ax 'er and say—'Will 'ee be my purty little wife, an' warm my cold 'art all the days o' my life?'—an' there'd be no wantin' dukes nor lords round when there's real love drivin' a man an' woman into each other's arms! Lord—Lord, don't I know it! Seems but t'other day I was a fine man o' thirty odd, an' walkin' under the hawthorns all white wi' bloom, an' my wife that was to be strollin' shy like at my side—we was kind o' skeered o' one another, courtin' without knowin' we was courtin' ezackly, an' she 'ad a little blue print gown on an' a white linen sunbonnet—I kin see 'er as clear an' plain as I see you, Passon!—an' she looks up an' she sez—'Ain't it a lovely day, Joe?' An' I sez—'Yes, it's lovely, an' you're lovely too!' An' my 'art gave a great dump agin my breast, an' 'fore I knowed it I 'ad 'er in my arms a-kissin' 'er for all I was worth! Ay, that was so—an' I never regretted them kisses under the may-trees, I tell ye! An' that's what'll 'appen to Squire's gel—some good

man 'ull walk by 'er side one o' these days, an' won't know wot he's a-doin' of nor she neither, an' love 'ull just come down an' settle in their 'arts like a broodin' dove o' the 'Oly Spirit, not speakin' blas*phe*mous, Passon, I do assure ye! For if Love ain't a 'Oly Spirit, then there ain't no Lord God in the 'Love one another!' I sez 'tis a 'Oly Spirit wot draws fond 'arts together an' makes 'em beat true—and the 'Oly Spirit 'ull fall on Squire's gel in its own time an' bring a blessin' with it. That's wot I sez,—are ye goin', Passon?"

"Yes—I'm going," said John in an uncertain voice, while Ipsie stared up at him in sudden enquiring wonder, perhaps because he looked so pale, and because the hand in which he held the rose she had given him trembled slightly—"I've a number of things to do, Josey—otherwise I should love to stop and hear you talk—you know I should!" and he smiled kindly—"For you are quite right, Josey! You have faith in the beautiful and the true, and so have I! I believe—yes—I believe that everything—even a great sorrow—is for the best. We cannot see,—we do not know—but we should trust the Divine mind of God enough to feel that all is, all must be well!"

"That's so, Passon!" said Josey, with grave heartiness—"Stick to that, an' we're all right. God bless ye! I'll see ye Sunday if I ain't gone to glory!"

Walden pulled open the garden gate to shake hands with the old man, and to kiss Ipsie who, as he lifted her up in his arms caressed his cheeks with her two dumpy hands.

"Has 'oo seen my lady-love?" she asked, in a crooning whisper—"My bootiful white lady-love?"

Walden looked at Josey perplexedly.

"She means Miss Maryllia,"—said the old man—"That's the name she's given 'er—lady-love—the thinkin' little imp she is! Where's lady-love? Why she's in 'er own house—she don't want any little tags o' babbies runnin' round 'er—your lady-love's got somethin' else to do."

"She *ain't*!" said Ipsie, with dramatic emphasis—"She tums an' sees me offen—'oo don't know nuffin' 'bout it! *Has*

'oo seen 'er?" she asked Walden again, taking hold of one end of his moustache very tenderly.

He patted the little chubby arm.

"I saw her the other night,"—he said, a sudden rush of words coming to his lips in answer to the child's query—"Yes, Ipsie,—I saw her! She was all in white, as a lady-love should be—only there were little flushes of pink on her dress like the sunset on a cloud—and she had diamonds in her hair,"—— Here Ipsie sighed a profound sigh of comfortable ecstasy—"and she looked very sweet and beautiful—and—and"—Here he suddenly paused. Josey Letherbarrow was looking at him with sudden interest. "And that's all, Ipsie!"

"Didn't she say nuffin' 'bout me?" asked the small autocrat.

Walden set her gently down on the ground.

"Not then, Ipsie,"—he said—"She was very busy. But I am sure she thought of you!"

Ipsie looked quite contented.

"'Ess,—my lady-love finks a lot, oh, a lot of me!" she said, seriously—"Allus finkin' of me!"

John smiled, and again shook old Josey's hand.

"Good-bye till Sunday!" he said.

"Good-bye, Passon!" rejoined Josey, cheerily—"Good luck t'ye! God bless ye!"

And the old man watched John's tall, slim athletic figure as long as his failing sight could follow it, murmuring to himself—

"Who'd 'a thought it!—who'd 'a thought it! Yet mebbe I'm wrong—an' mebbe I'm right!—for the look o' love never lightens a man's eyes like that but once in 'is life—all the rest o' the sparkles is only imitations o' the real fire. The real fire burns once, an' only once—an' it's fierce an' hot when it kindles up in a man after the days o' his youth are gone! An' if the real fire worn't in Passon's eyes when he talked o' the lady-love, then I'm an old idgit wot never felt my heart go dunt agin my side in courtin' time!"

Walden meanwhile went on his round of visits, and presently,—the circle of his poorer parishioners being com-

pleted,—he decided to call on Julian Adderley at his 'cottage in the wood' and tell him also of his intended absence. He had taken rather a liking to this eccentric off-shoot of an eccentric literary set,—he had found that despite some slight surface affectations, Julian had very straight principles, and loyal ideas of friendship, and that he was not without a certain poetic talent which, if he studied hard and to serious purpose, might develop into something of more or less worthiness. Some lines that he had recently written and read aloud to Walden, had a haunting ring which clung to the memory:

Art thou afraid to live, my Heart?
Look round and see
What life at its best,
With its strange unrest,
Can mean for thee!
Ceaseless sorrow and toil,
Waits for each son of the soil;
And the highest work seems ever unpaid
By God and man,
In the mystic plan;—
Think of it! Art thou afraid?

Art thou afraid to love, my Heart?
Look well and see,
If any sweet thing,
That can sigh or sing,
Hath need of thee!
Of Love cometh wild desire,
Hungry and fierce as fire,
In the souls of man and maid,—
But the fulness thereof
Is the end of love,—
Think of it! Art thou afraid?

Art thou afraid of Death, my Heart?
Look down and see,
What the corpse on the bed,
So lately dead,
Can teach to thee!

Is it the close of the strife,
Or a new beginning of Life?
The secret is not betrayed;—
But Darkness makes clear
That Light must be near!
Think of it! Art thou afraid?

"'Darkness makes clear, that Light must be near,'—I am sure that is true!"—murmured John, as he swung along at a quick pace through a green lane leading out of the village into the wider country, where two or three quaint little houses with thatched roofs were nestled among the fields, looking like dropped acorns in the green,—"It must be true,—there are so many old saws and sayings of the same kind, like 'The darkest hour's before the dawn.' But why should I seek to console myself with a kind of Tupper 'proverbial philosophy'? I have no black hour threatening me,—I have nothing in the world to complain of or grumble at except my own undisciplined nature, which even at my age shows me it can 'kick against the pricks' and make a fool of me!"

Here turning a corner of the road which was overshaded by a huge chestnut-tree, he suddenly came face to face with the Reverend Putwood Leveson, who, squatted on the bank by the roadside, with his grand-pianoforte legs well exposed to view in tight brown knickerbockers and grey worsted stockings, was bending perspiringly over his recumbent bicycle, mending something which had, as usual, gone wrong.

"Hullo, Walden!" he said, looking up and nodding casually—"Haven't seen you for an age! What have you been doing with yourself? Always up at the Manor, I suppose! Great attraction at the Manor!—he-he-he!"

A certain quick irritation, like that produced by the teasing buzz of some venomous insect, affected Walden's nerves. He looked at the porcine proportions of his brother minister with an involuntary sense of physical repulsion. Then he answered stiffly—

"I don't understand you. I have not been visiting at the

Manor at all. I dined there the night before last for the first and only time."

Leveson winked one purple puffy eyelid. Then he began his 'He–he–he' again to himself, while he breathed hard and sweated profusely over the rubber tyre of his machine.

"Is that so?" he sniggered—"Well, that's all the better for you!—you do well to keep away! Men of our cloth ought not to be seen there really."

And scrambling to his feet with elephantine ease, he brushed the dust from his knickers, and wiped his brows with an uncleanly handkerchief which looked as if it had been used for drying oil off the bicycle as well as off the man.

"We ought not to be seen there,"—he repeated, disregarding Walden's steady coldness of eye—"I myself made a great mistake when I wrote to the woman. I ought not to have done so. But of course I did not know—I thought it was all right." And the reverend gentleman assumed an air of mammoth-like innocence—"I am so mediæval, you know!—I never suspect anything or anybody! I wrote to her in quite a friendly way, suggesting that I should arrange her family papers for her—I thought she might as well employ me as anyone else—and she never answered my letter—never answered a word!"

"Well, of course not!" said Walden, composedly, though his blood began to tingle hotly through his veins with rising indignation—"Why should she? Her family papers are all in order, and no doubt she considered your application both ignorant and impertinent."

Leveson's gross countenance flushed a deeper crimson.

"Ignorant and impertinent!" he echoed—"Come, I like that! Why she ought to have considered herself uncommonly lucky to receive so much as a civil letter from a respectable man,—such a woman as she is!—'Maryllia Van'—he–he–he–he!"

Walden took a quick step towards him.

"What do you mean?" he demanded—"What right have you to speak of her in such a manner?"

Leveson recoiled, startled by the intense pallor of Walden's face, and the threatening light in his eyes.

"What right?" he stammered—"Why—why what do *you* mean by flaring up in such a temper, eh? What does it matter to you?"

"It matters this much,—that I will not allow Miss Vancourt to be insulted by you or anyone else!" retorted Walden, hotly—"You have never spoken to her,—you know nothing about her,—so hold your tongue!"

The Reverend 'Putty's' round eyes protruded with amazement.

"Hold—my—tongue!" he repeated, in a kind of stupefaction—"Are you gone mad, Walden? Do you know who you are talking to?"

John gave a short laugh. His hands clenched involuntarily.

"Oh, I know well enough!" he said—"I am talking to a man who has no more regard for a woman's name than a cat has for the mouse it kills! I am talking to a man who is an ordained Christian minister, but who has less Christianity than a dog, which at least is faithful to its master!"

Leveson uttered a kind of inarticulate sound something between a gasp and a grunt. Then he fell back on his old snigger.

"He-he, he-he-he!" he bleated—"You must be crazy, Walden!—or else you've been drinking! I've a perfect right to speak of the Abbot's Manor woman *if* I like and *as* I like! All men have a right to do the same—she's been pretty well handed round as common property for a long time! Why, she's perfectly notorious!—everybody knows that!"

"You lie!"

And Walden sprang at him, one powerful clenched fist uplifted. Leveson staggered back in terror,—and so for a moment they stood, staring upon one another. They did not hear a stealthy rustle among the branches of the chestnut-tree near which they stood, nor see a long lithe shadow creep towards them for the dense low-hanging foliage. Face to face, eye to eye, they remained for a moment's space as though

ready to close and wrestle,—then suddenly Walden's arm dropped to his side.

"My God!" he muttered—"I nearly struck you!"

Leveson drew a long breath of relief, and sneaked backward on his heels.

"You—you're a nice kind of 'ordained Christian minister' aren't you?" he spluttered—"With all your humbug and cant you're no better than a vulgar bully! A vulgar bully!—that's what you are! I'll report you to the Bishop—see if I don't!—brow-beating me, and putting me in bodily fear, all about a woman too! Great Scott!—a fine scandal you'll make in the Church one of these days if you're not watched pretty closely and pulled up pretty sharply—and pulled up you shall be, take my word for it! We've had about enough of your high-and-mighty airs—it's time you learned to know your place——"

The words had scarcely left his mouth when a pair of long muscular arms seized him by the shoulders, shook him briefly and emphatically, and turning him easily over, deposited him flat in the dust.

"'Tis time—yea verily! it is full time you learned to know your place!" said Julian Adderley, calmly standing with legs astride across his fat recumbent body—"And there it is—and there you are! My dear Walden, how are you? Excuse my shaking hands with you—having defiled myself, as the Orientals say, by touching unclean meat, I must wash first!"

For a moment Walden had been so taken aback by the suddenness of Leveson's unexpected overthrow that he could scarcely realise what had happened,—but presently when the Reverend 'Putty's' cobby legs began to sprawl uneasily on the ground, and the Reverend 'Putty' himself gave vent to sundry blasphemous oaths and curses, he grasped the full humour of the situation. A broad smile lit up his face.

"That was a master-stroke, Adderley!" he said, and the smile deepened into sudden laughter—"But how in the world did you come here?"

"I was here all the time,"—said Adderley, still standing

across Leveson's prostrate form—"Returning to the habits of primæval monkey as I often do, I was seated in the boughs of that venerable chestnut-tree—and I heard all the argument. I enjoyed it. I was hoping to see the Church militant belabour the Church recusant. It would have been so new—so fresh! But as the sacred blow failed, the secular one was bound to fall. Don't get up, my excellent sir!—don't, I beseech of you!" This to Leveson, who was trying by means of the most awkward contortions to rise to a sitting posture—"You will find it difficult—among other misfortunes your knickers will burst, and there is no tailor close at hand. Spare yourself,—and us!"

"Oh give him a hand, Adderley!" said Walden, good-naturedly. "Help him up! He's had his beating!"

"He hasn't,"—declared Julian, with a lachrymose air of intense regret—"I wish he had! He is less hurt than if he had fallen off his bicycle. He is in no pain;—would that he were!"

Here Leveson managed to partially lift himself on one side.

"Assault!" he stuttered—"Assault—common assault——"

"*And* battery,"—said Julian—"You can summons me, my dear sir—if you feel so inclined! I shall be happy to explain the whole incident in court—and also to pay the five pounds penalty. I only wish I could have got more for my money. There's such a lot of you!—such a lot!" he repeated, musingly, "And I've only sailed round such a small portion of your vast fleshy continent!"

Walden controlled his laughter, and stooping, offered to assist Leveson to get up, but the indignant 'Putty' refused all aid, and setting his own two hands firmly against the ground, tried again to rise.

"Remove your legs, sir!" he shouted to Julian, who still stood across him in apparent abstraction—"How dare you—how dare you pin me down in this fashion?—how dare——"

Here his voice died away choked by rage.

"You are witty without knowing it, my fat friend!" said

Julian languidly—"Legs, in slang parlance, are sometimes known as 'pins,'—therefore, when you say I 'pin' you down, you use an expression which is, like the 'mobled queen' in Hamlet, good. Be unpinned, good priest—and remember that you must be prepared to say your prayers backwards, next time you slander a woman!"

He relaxed his position, and Leveson with an effort scrambled to his feet, covered with dust. Picking up his cap from the gutter where it had fallen, he got his bicycle and prepared to mount it. He presented a most unlovely spectacle—his face, swollen and crimson with fury, seemed twice its usual size,—his little piggy eyes rolled in his head like those of a man threatened with apoplexy—and the oily perspiration stood upon his brow and trickled from his carroty hair in great drops.

"You shall pay for this!" he said in low vindictive tones, shaking his fist at both Walden and Adderley—"There are one or two old scores to be wiped off in this village, and mine will help to increase the account! Your fine lady at the Manor isn't going to have everything her own way, I can tell you—nor you either, you—you—you upstart!"

With this last epithet hurled out at Walden, who, shrugging his shoulders, received it with ineffable contempt, he got on his machine and worked his round legs and round wheels together furiously away. When his bulky form had disappeared, the two men he had left behind glanced at one another, and moved by the same risible emotion burst out laughing,—and once their laughter began, they gave it full vent, Walden's mellow 'Ha-ha-ha!' ringing out on the still air with all the zest and heartiness of a boy's mirth.

"Upon my word, Adderley, you are a capital 'thrower'!" he said, clapping Julian on the shoulder. "I never was more surprised in my life than to see that monstrous 'ton of man' heave over suddenly and sprawl in the dust! It was an artistic feat, most artistically executed!"

"It was—it was,—I think so myself!"—agreed Julian—"I am proud of my own skill! That pious porpoise will not

forget me in a hurry. You see, my dear Walden, you merely threatened punishment,—you did not inflict it,—I suppose out of some scruple of Church conscience, which is quite a different conscience to the lay examples,—and it was necessary to act promptly. The air of St. Rest is remarkably free from miasma, but Leveson was discharging microbes from his tongue and person generally that would have been dangerous to life in another minute." He laughed again. "Were you coming my way?"

"Yes, I was," replied Walden, as they began to walk along the road together—"I am going away on a visit, and I meant to call and say good-bye to you."

Julian glanced at him curiously.

"Going away? For long?"

"Oh no! Only for two or three days. I want to see my Bishop."

"On a point of conscience?"

John smiled, but coloured a little too.

"No—not exactly! We are very old friends, Brent and I—but we have not met for seven years,—not since my church was consecrated. It will be pleasant to us to have a chat about old times——"

"And new times—don't leave *them* out," said Julian—"They are quite as interesting. The present is as pleasing as the past, don't you think so?"

Walden hesitated. A touch of sorrow and lingering regret clouded his eyes.

"No—I cannot say that I do!" he answered, at last, with a sigh—"In the past I was young, with all the world before me,—in the present I am old, with all the world behind me!"

"Does it matter?" and Adderley lifted his eyelids with a languid expression—"For instance let us suppose that in the past you have lost something and that in the present you gain something, does it not equalise the position?"

"The gain is very little in my case!"—said John, yet even as he spoke he felt a pang of shame at his own thanklessness. Had he not secured a peaceful home, a round of work that he

loved, and happiness far beyond his merits, and had not God blessed him with health and a quiet mind? Yes—till quite lately he had had a quiet mind—but now——

"You perhaps do not realise how much the gain is, or how far it extends,"—pursued Adderley, thoughtfully—"Youth and age appear to me to have perfectly equal delights and drawbacks. Take me, for example,—I am young, but I am in haste to be older, and when I am old I am sure I shall never want to be young again. It is too unsettled a condition!"

Walden smiled, but made no answer. They walked on in comparative silence till they reached Adderley's cottage—a humble but charmingly artistic tenement, with a thatched roof and a small garden in front which was little more than a tangle of roses.

"I am taking this house—this mansion—on," said Julian, pausing at the gate—"I shall stop here all winter. The surroundings suit me. Inspiration visits me in the flowering of the honeysuckle, and encircles me in the whispering of the wind among the roses. When the leaves drop and the roses fade, I shall hear a different chord on the harp of song. When the sleet and snow begin to fall, I shall listen to the dripping of the tears of Nature with as much sympathy as I now bask in her smiles. I have been writing verses to the name of Maryllia—they are not finished—but they will come by degrees—yes!—I am sure they will come! This is how they begin,"—and leaning on the low gate of his cottage entrance he recited softly, with half-closed eyes:

In the flowering-time of year
When the heavens were crystal clear,
And the skylark's singing sweet
Close against the sun did beat,—
All the sylphs of all the streams,
All the fairies born in dreams,
All the elves with wings of flame,
Trooping forth from Cloudland came
To the wooing of Maryllia!

Walden murmured something inarticulate, but Adderley waved him into silence, and continued:

> Woodland sprites of ferns and trees,
> Ariels of the wandering breeze,
> Kelpies from the hidden caves
> Coral-bordered 'neath the waves,
> Sylphs, that in the rose's heart
> Laugh when leaves are blown apart,—
> All the Faun and Dryad crew
> From their mystic forests flew
> To the wooing of Maryllia!

"Very fanciful!" said John, with a forced smile—"I suppose you can go on like that interminably?"

"I can, and I will,"—said Julian—"So long as the fit possesses me. But not now. You are in a hurry, and you wish to say good-bye. You imply the P.P.C. in your aspect. So be it! I shall see you on Sunday in the pulpit as usual?"

"Yes."

"Badsworth Hall will probably attend your ministrations, so I am told,"—continued Julian—"Lord Roxmouth wants to hear you preach,—and Sir Morton himself proposes to 'sit under' you."

"Sorry for it!" said Walden abruptly—"He should attend his own 'cure'—Mr. Leveson."

They laughed.

"Of course you don't credit that story about Miss Vancourt's marriage with Lord Roxmouth?" queried Adderley, suddenly.

"I am slow to believe anything I hear,"—replied John—"But—is it quite without foundation?"

Adderley looked him straight in the eyes.

"Quite! Very quite! Most quite! My dear Walden, you are pale! A change, even a brief one, will do you good. Go and see your Bishop by all means. And tell him how nearly, how very nearly you gave prestige to the calling of a Churchman by knocking down a rascal!"

They parted then; and by sundown Walden was in the train

speeding away from St. Rest at the rate of fifty miles an hour to one of the great manufacturing cities where human beings swarm together more thickly than bees in a hive, and over-crowd and jostle each other's lives out in the desperate struggle for mere bread. Bainton and Nebbie were left sole masters of the rectory and its garden, and both man and dog were depressed in spirits and more or less restless and discontented.

"'Tain't what it used to be by no manner o' means,"—muttered Bainton, looking with a dejected air round the orchard, where the wall fruit was hanging in green clusters of promise—"Passon don't seem to care, an' when *he* don't care then *I* don't care! Why, it seems onny t'other day 'twas May morning, an' he was carryin' Ipsie Frost on his shoulder, an' leadin' all the children wi' the Maypole into the big meadow, an' all was as right as right could be,—yet 'ere we're onny just in August an' everything's topsy-turvy like. Lord, Lord!—'ow trifles do make up a sum o' life to be sure, as the copybooks sez—for arter all, what's 'appened? Naught in any wise partikler. Miss Vancourt 'as come 'ome to her own,—an' she's 'ad a few friends from Lunnon stayin' with 'er. That's simple enough, as simple as plantains growin' in a lawn. Then Miss Vancourt's 'usband that is to be, comes down an' stays with old Blusterdash Pippitt at the 'All, in order to be near 'is sweet'art. There ain't nothin' out of the common in that. It's all as plain as piecrust. An' Passon ain't done nothin' either but jest his dooty as he allus doos it,—he ain't been up to the Manor more'n once,—he ain't been at the 'All,—an' Miss Vancourt she ain't been 'ere neither since the day he broke his best lilac for 'er. So it can't be she what's done mischief—nor him, nor any on 'em. So I sez to myself, what is it? What's come over the old place? What's come over Passon? Neither place nor man's the same somehow, yet blest if I know where the change comes in. It's like one of the ways o' the Lord, past findin' out!"

He might have thought there was something still more to wonder at if he could have looked into Josey Letherbarrow's cottage that evening and seen Maryllia there, sitting on a low

stool at the old man's knee and patting his wrinkled hand tenderly, while she talked to him in a soft undertone and he listened with grave intentness and sagacity, though also with something of sorrow.

"An' so ye think it's the onny way, my beauty?" he queried, anxiously—"There ain't no other corner round it?"

"I'm afraid not, dear Josey!" she answered, with a sigh—"And I'm telling you all about it, because you knew my father, and because you saw me when I was a little child. You would not like me to marry a man whom I hate?—a man who is bad right through, and who only wants my aunt's money, which he would get if I consented to be his wife. I am sure, Josey, you don't think money is the best thing in life, do you?—I know you agree with me that love is better?"

Josey looked down upon her where she sat with an almost devout tenderness.

"Love's the onny thing in the world worth 'avin' an' keepin', my beauty!" he said—"An' love's wot you desarves, an' wot you're sure to get! I wouldn't see Squire's gel married for money, no, not if it was a reg'ler gold mine!—I'd rather see 'er in 'er daisy grave fust! An' I don't want to see 'er with a lord nor a duke,—I'll be content to see 'er with a good man if the Lord will grant me that 'fore I die! An' you do as you feels to be right, an' all things 'ull work together for good to them as loves the Lord! That's Passon's teachin', an' rare good teachin' it be!"

At this Maryllia rose rather hurriedly and put on her hat, tying its chiffon strings slowly under her chin.

"Good-bye, Josey dear!" she said—"It won't be for very long. But you must keep my secret—you mustn't say a word, not even"—here she paused and laughed a little forcedly—"not even to the Parson you're so fond of!"

Josey looked at her sideways, with a quaintly meditative expression.

"Passon be gone away hisself,"—he said, a little smile creeping among the kindly wrinkles of his brown weather-beaten face—"He baint comin' back till Sunday."

"Gone away?" Maryllia was quite unconscious of the vibration of pain in her voice as she asked the question, as she was equally of the startled sorrow in her pretty eyes.

"Ah, my beauty, gone away,"—repeated Josey, with a curious sort of placid satisfaction—"Passon, he be lookin' downhearted like, an' a change o' scene 'ull do 'im good mebbe, an' bring 'im back all the better for it. He came an' said good-bye to me this marnin'."

Maryllia stood for a moment irresolute. Why had he gone away? Her brows met in a little puckered line of puzzled wonder.

"He be gone to see the Bishop,"—pursued Josey, watching her tenderly with his old dim eyes,—it was like reading a love-story to see the faint colour flushing those soft round cheeks of hers, and the tremulous quiver of that sweet sensitive mouth—"Church business, likely. But never you mind, my beauty!—he'll be 'ere to preach, please the Lord, on Sunday."

"Oh, I don't mind," said Maryllia, quickly recovering herself—"Only I sha'n't be here, you see——and——and I had intended to explain something to him——however, it doesn't matter! I can write all I wanted to say. Good-bye, Josey! Give my love to Ipsie!"

"Good-bye, my beauty!" returned Josey, with emphatic earnestness—"An' God bless ye an' make all the rough places smooth for ye! You'll find us all 'ere, lovin' an' true, whenever ye comes, mornin' noon or night—the village ain't the world, but you've got round it, my dearie—you've got round it!"

And in the deep midnight when the church chimes rang the hour, and the moon poured a pearly shower of luminance over the hushed woodland and silently winding river, Josey lay broad awake, resignedly conscious of his extreme age, and thinking soberly of the beginning and end of life,—the dawn and fruition of love,—the wonderful, beautiful, complex labyrinth of experience through which every human soul is guided from one mystic turn to another of mingled joy and sorrow by that supreme Wisdom, Whom, though we cannot see, we

trust,—and feeling the near close of his own long life-journey, he folded his withered hands and prayed aloud:

"For all Thy childern, O Lord God, that 'ave gone by the last milestone on the road an' are growin' footsore an' weary, let there be Thy peace which passeth all understandin'!—but for Squire's gel with the little lonely heart of 'er beatin' like the wings of a bird that wants a nest, let there be Love!"

CHAPTER XXVI

NEXT day at Badsworth Hall, a stately luncheon was in progress. Luncheon, or indeed any meal, partaken of under the rolling and excitable eye of Sir Morton Pippitt, was always a function fraught with considerable embarrassment to any guests who might happen to be present, being frequently assisted by the Shakespearean stage direction 'alarums and excursions.' With Sir Morton at the head of the table, and the acid personality of his daughter Miss Tabitha at the foot, there was very little chance of more than merely monosyllabic conversation, while any idea of merriment, geniality or social interchange of thought, withered in conception and never came to birth. The attention of both host and hostess was chiefly concentrated on the actual or possible delinquencies of the servants in attendance—and what with Sir Morton's fierce nods and becks to unhappy footmen, and Miss Tabitha's freezing menace of brow bent warningly against the butler, those who, as visitors, were outside these privacies of the domestic circle, never felt altogether at their ease. But the fact that other people were made uncomfortable by his chronic irascibility moved Sir Morton not at all, so long as he personally could enjoy himself in his own fashion, which was to browbeat, bully and swear at every hapless household retainer that came across his path in the course of the day. He was more than usually choleric and fussy in the 'distinguished' presence of Lord Roxmouth, for though that individual had gone the social pace very thoroughly, and was, to put it mildly, a black sheep of modern decadence, hopelessly

past all regeneration, he still presented the exterior appearances of a gentleman, and was careful to maintain that imperturbable composure of mien, dignity of bearing, and unruffled temper which indicate breeding, though they are far from being evidences of sincerity. And thus it very naturally happened that in the companionship of the future Duke of Ormistoune, Sir Morton did not shine. His native vulgarity came out side by side with his childish pomposity, and Roxmouth, after studying his habits, customs and manners for two or three days, began to feel intensely bored and out of humour.

"Upon my word,"—he said, to his *fidus Achates*, Marius Longford,—"I am enduring a great deal for the sake of the Vancourt millions! To follow an erratic girl like Maryllia from one Continental resort to another was bad enough,—but to stay here in tame, highly respectable country dullness is a thousand times worse! Why on earth, my good fellow, could you not have found a more educated creature to play host to me than this terrible old Bone-Boiler?"

Longford pressed the tips of his fingers together with a deprecatory gesture.

"There was really no one else who could receive you,"—he answered, almost apologetically—"I thought I had managed the affair rather well. You will remember that directly Miss Vancourt had announced to her aunt her intention to return to her own home, you sent me down here to investigate the place and its surroundings, and see what I could do.' Sir Morton Pippitt seemed to be the only person, from the general bent of his character, to suit your aims, and his house was, (before he had it) of very excellent historic renown. I felt sure you would be able to use him. There is no other large place in the neighbourhood except Miss Vancourt's own Manor, and Ittlethwaite Park—I doubt whether you could have employed the Ittlethwaites to much purpose——"

"Spare me the suggestion!" yawned Roxmouth—"I should not have tried!"

"Well, there is no one else of suitable position, or indeed of sufficient wealth to entertain you,"—continued Longford—

"Unless you had wished me to fraternise with the brewer, Mordaunt Appleby? *He* certainly might have been useful! He would sell his soul to a title!"

Roxmouth gave an exclamation of mingled contempt and impatience, and dropped the conversation. But he was intensely weary of Sir Morton's 'fine jovial personality'—he hated his red face, his white hair, his stout body, his servile obsequiousness to rank, and all his 'darling old man' ways. Darling old man he might be, but he was unquestionably a dull old man as well. So much so, indeed, that when at luncheon on the day now named, his lordship Roxmouth, as Mr. Netlips would have styled him, was in a somewhat petulant mood, being tired of the constant scolding of the servants that went on around him, and being likewise moved to a sort of loathing repulsion at the contemplation of Miss Tabitha's waxy-clean face lined with wrinkles, and bordered by sternly smooth grey hair. He was lazily wondering to himself whether she had ever been young—whether the same waxy face, wrinkles and grey hair had not adorned her in her very cradle,—when the appearance of an evidently highly nervous boy in buttons, carrying a letter towards his host on a silver salver, distracted his attention.

"What's this—what's this?" spluttered Sir Morton, hastily dropping a fork full of peas which he had been in the act of conveying to his mouth—"What are you bringing notes in here for, eh? Haven't I told you I won't have my meals disturbed by messages and parcels? What d'ye mean by it? Take it away—take it away!—No!—here!—stop a minute, stop a minute! Yes—yes!—I see!—marked 'immediate,' and from Abbot's Manor. My dear lord!"—And here he raised his voice to a rich warble—"I believe this will concern you more than me—ha-ha-ha!—yes, yes! we know a thing or two! 'When a woman will, she will, you may depend on't!' —never mind the other line!—never mind, never mind!" And he broke open the seal of the missive presented to him, and adjusted his gold-rimmed spectacles to read its contents. "Eh—what's this—what's this? God bless my soul!" And

his round eyes protruded in astonishment and dismay—"Look here!—I say—really! You'd better read this, my lord! God bless my soul! She's bolted!"

Roxmouth started violently. Mr. Marius Longford looked up sharply—and Miss Tabitha laid down her knife and fork with the regular old maid's triumphant air of 'I told you so!'

"God bless my soul!" said Sir Morton again—"Was ever such a bit of damned cheek!—beg pardon, my lord!——"

"Don't apologise!" said Roxmouth, with courteous languor, "At least, not to *me*! To Miss Tabitha!" and he waved his hand expressively. "May I see the letter?"

"Certainly—certainly!" and Sir Morton in a great fluster passed it along. It was a very brief note and ran as follows:

"DEAR SIR MORTON,—I quite forgot to tell you, when you and your friends dined with me the other day, that I am leaving home immediately and shall be away for the rest of the summer. Lady Wicketts and Miss Fosby are staying on at the Manor for a fortnight or three weeks, as the country air does them so much good. It will be very kind if you and Lord Roxmouth will call and see them as often as you can,—they are such dear kind people!—and I am sure Miss Tabitha will be glad to have them near her as she already likes them so much. Anything you can do to give them pleasure while they are here, will be esteemed as a personal favour to myself. I am sorry not to have the time to call and say good-bye—but I am sure you will excuse ceremony. I shall have left before you receive this note.—With kind regards, sincerely yours,

"MARYLLIA VANCOURT."

Roxmouth read this letter, first to himself, and then aloud to all at table. For a moment there was a silence of absolute stupefaction.

"Then she's gone!" at last said Miss Tabitha, placidly nodding, while the suspicion of a malign smile crept round the hard corners of her mouth.

"Evidently!" And Roxmouth crumbled the bread beside his plate into fine shreds with a nervous, not to say vicious clench of his hand.

He was inwardly furious. There is nothing so irritating to a man of his type as to be made ridiculous. Maryllia had done this. In the most trifling, casual, and ordinary way she had compelled him to look like a fool. All his carefully laid plans were completely upset, and he fancied that even Longford, his tool, to whom he had freely confided his wishes and intentions, was secretly laughing at him. To have plotted and contrived a stay at Badsworth Hall with the blusterous Pippitt in order to have the opportunity of crossing Maryllia's path at every turn, and compromising her name with his in her own house and county, and then to find himself 'left,' with the civil suggestion that he should 'call and see' the antique Sisters Gemini, Lady Wicketts and Miss Fosby, was somewhat too much for his patience. The blow was totally unexpected,—the open slight to his *amour propre* sudden and keen. His very blood tingled under the lash of Maryllia's disdain—she had carried a point against him, and he almost imagined he could hear the distant echo of her light mocking laughter. His brow reddened,—he gnawed his under-lip angrily, and sat mute, aware that he had been tricked and foiled.

Longford watched him narrowly and with something of dismay,—for if this lordly patron, who, by his position alone, was able to push things on in certain quarters of the press, were to suddenly turn crusty and unreasonable, where would his, Longford's, 'great literary light' be? Quenched utterly like a rushlight in a gale! Sir Morton Pippitt during the uncomfortable pause of silence had grown purple with suppressed excitement. He knew perfectly well,—because he had consented to it,—that his house had only been 'used' for Roxmouth's purposes, and that he, personally, was of no more consideration to a man like the future Duke of Ormistoune than a landlord for the time being, whose little reckoning for entertainment would in due course be settled in some polite and ceremonious fashion. And he realised dolefully that his

'distinguished guest might, and probably would, soon take his departure from Badsworth Hall, that abode no longer being of any service to him. This meant annihilation to many of Sir Morton's fondest hopes. He had set his heart on appearing at sundry garden-parties in the neighbourhood during the summer with Lord Roxmouth under his portly wing—he had meant to hurl Lord Roxmouth here, Lord Roxmouth there at all the less 'distinguished' people around him, so that they should almost sink into the dust with shame because they had not had the honour of sheltering his lordship within their walls,—and he had expected to add considerably to his own importance by 'helping on' the desired union between Roxmouth Castle and the Vancourt millions. Now this dream was over, and he could willingly have thrown plates and dishes and anything else that came handy at the very name of Maryllia for her 'impudence' as he called it, in leaving them all in the lurch.

"It will be quite easy to ascertain where she has gone,"—said Marius Longford presently, in soft conciliatory accents—"Lady Wicketts will probably know, and Miss Fosby——"

"Damn Lady Wicketts and Miss Fosby!" snapped out Sir Morton, this time without any apology—"A couple of female donkeys! 'Kind of me to call upon them!' God bless my soul! I should think it *would* be kind! Nobody but a fool would go near them——"

"They are very pleasant, good women,"—said Miss Tabitha with severe serenity—"Personally, I much prefer them to Miss Vancourt."

Sir Morton snorted contempt; Mr. Longford coughed discreetly.

"Miss Vancourt has not yet ripened sufficiently to bear comparison with Lady Wicketts,"—he said, smoothly—"or with Miss Fosby. But I think, Miss Pippitt, there is a great deal in what you say!" Miss Tabitha bowed, and smiled a vinegary smile. "Lady Wicketts has a fine mind—very fine! Her husband, Sir Thomas——"

"Oh never mind her husband!" blustered Sir Morton,—

"He's dead. And a good job too—for himself. Now what's to be done, my dear lord, eh?—what's to be done?"

Roxmouth looked up and managed to force his usual conventional smile.

"Nothing!"

"Nothing? Oh come, come! That won't do! Faint heart never won fair lady—ha-ha-ha! God bless my soul! The course of true love never did run smooth—that's the advice of what's-his-name—Shakespeare. Ha-ha! By the bye, what's become of that poet acquaintance of yours, Longford? Oughtn't *he* to have known something about this? Didn't you tell him to keep a sharp look-out on Maryllia Van, eh?"

Longford reddened slightly under his pale yellow skin. What a vulgar way Sir Morton had of putting things, to be sure!

"I certainly asked Mr. Adderley to let us know if there was anything in which we could possibly participate to give pleasure and entertainment to Miss Vancourt,"—he answered frigidly—"He seems to have ingratiated himself with both Miss Vancourt and her young friend Miss Bourne—I should have thought he would have been told of their intending departure."

"You may depend he knows all about it!" said Sir Morton—"He's double-faced, that's what he is! Poets always are. I hate 'em! Regular sneaks!—always something queer about their morals—look at Byron!—God bless my soul!—he ought to have been locked up—positively locked up, ha-ha-ha! We'll come down on this Adderley—we'll take him by surprise and cross-examine him—we'll ask him why the devil he has played a double game——"

"Pray do not think of such a thing!"—interrupted Roxmouth, quietly—"I really doubt whether he knows any more than we do. Maryllia—Miss Vancourt—is not of a character to confide her movements, even to a friend,—she has always been reticent——" He paused.

"And sly!"—said Miss Tabitha, finishing his sentence for him,—"Very sly! The first time I ever saw Miss

Vancourt I knew she was deceitful! Her very look expresses it!"

"I'm afraid,"—murmured Roxmouth,—and then hesitating a moment, he raised his eyes with an affectation of great frankness—"I'm really afraid you may be right, Miss Tabitha! I had hoped that I should not have had to speak of a matter,—a very disagreeable matter which happened the other night—but, under the circumstances, it may be as well to mention it. You can perhaps imagine how distressing it has been to me—distressing and painful—and indeed incredible,—to discover the lady whom I have every right to consider almost my promised wife, entering into a kind of amorous entanglement down here with a clergyman!"

Sir Morton bounced in his chair.

"God bless my soul! A clergyman?"

"A clergyman?" echoed Miss Tabitha, with sudden sharpness in her tone—"What clergyman do you mean?"

"Who should I mean!" And Roxmouth affected a somewhat sad and forbearing demeanour—"There is only one who appears to be welcome at the Manor—the Reverend John Walden!"

Miss Tabitha turned a paler waxen yellow—Sir Morton shot forth a deep, dreadful and highly blasphemous oath.

"That prig?" he roared, with a bull-like loudness and fury—"That high-and-mighty piece of damned superior clerical wisdom? God bless my soul! There must be some mistake——"

"Yes surely!"—murmured Miss Tabitha, feeling the clutch of a deadly spite and fear at her heart,—for was not Walden *her* clergyman?—*her* choice of a husband?—the man she had resolved to wed sooner or later, even if she had to wait till he was senile, and did not know what he was doing when led to the altar? "Mr. Walden is not a man who would be easily allured——"

"Perhaps not,"—said Roxmouth, quietly—"But I can hardly refuse to accept the witness of my own eyes and ears!" And, attended by an almost breathless silence on the part of

his auditors, he related with an air of patient endurance and compassionate regret, his own account of the interview between Maryllia and Walden in the picture-gallery, exaggerating something here, introducing a suggestive insinuation there, suppressing the simplicity of the true facts, and inserting falsehood wherever convenient, till he had succeeded in placing Walden's good name at Miss Tabitha's cat-like mercy for her to rend and pounce upon to the utmost extent of her own jaundiced rage and jealous venom.

Nothing could equal or surpass Sir Morton's amazement and wrath as he listened to the narration. His eyes seemed to literally start out of his head,—his throat swelled visibly till a fat ridge of flesh lolled over the edge of his stiff shirt-collar, and he threw in various observations of his own with regard to Walden, such as 'Snivelling puppy!' 'Canting rascal!' 'Elderly humbug!' 'Sneaking upstart!' which were quite in accordance with his native good taste and refinement of speech. And when at last his stock of expletives became, for the time being, exhausted, and when Miss Tabitha's dumb viciousness had, like an invisible sculptor's chisel, carved sudden deep lines in her face as fitting accompaniments to the deepening malice of her thoughts, they all rose from the luncheon table and went their several ways in their several moods of disconcerted confusion, impotence and vexation, in search of fresh means to gain new and unexpected ends. Roxmouth, reluctantly yielding to the earnest persuasions of Longford, walked with him into the village of St. Rest, and made enquiries at the post-office as to whether Miss Vancourt's sudden departure was known there, or whether any instructions had been left as to the forwarding of her letters. But the postmistress, Mrs. Tapple, breathing hard and curtseying profoundly to the 'future Dook' declared she ''adn't heard nothink,' and ''adn't 'ad no orders.' Miss Vancourt's letters and telegrams all went up to the Manor as usual. Whereupon still guided by the astute Longford, Roxmouth so far obeyed Maryllia's parting suggestion as to go and 'kindly call' upon Lady Wicketts and Miss Fosby at the Manor itself.

The beautiful old house looked the same as usual; there were no shutters up, no blinds drawn in any of the windows,—nothing indicated absence on the part of the reigning mistress of the fair domain; and even the dog Plato was comfortably snoozing according to daily custom, on the sun-baked flag-stones in the Tudor court. Primmins opened the door to them with his usual well-trained and imperturbable demeanour.

"Miss Vancourt is not at home?" began Roxmouth tentatively.

"Miss Vancourt has left for the Continent, my lord," replied Primmins, sedately.

Longford exchanged a swift glance with his patron. The latter gave a slight, weary shrug of his shoulders.

"Miss Bourne,"—began Longford then.

"Miss Bourne and Mr. Gigg have also left," said Primmins.

"I suppose Miss Vancourt went with them?"

"No, sir."

This was baffling.

"Lady Wicketts is staying here, I believe,"—murmured Roxmouth—"Can I——er?"

"Her ladyship has the neuralgy and is lying down, my lord," and an acute observer might have noticed the tremor of a wink in Primmins' eye——"Miss Fosby is in the drawing-room."

With a profound sigh Roxmouth glanced at Longford. That gentleman smiled a superior smile.

"We should like to see Miss Fosby."

Primmins at once threw open the door more widely.

"This way, if you please!"

In another moment they were ushered into the presence of Miss Fosby, who, laying aside her embroidery, rose with punctilious ceremony to receive them.

"Lady Wicketts is not well,"—she said, in tenderly lachrymose accents—"Dear Lady Wicketts! She is always so good!—always thinking of other people and doing such kind things!—she fatigues herself, and she is so delicate—ah!—so very delicate! She is suffering from neuralgia, I am sorry to say!"

"Don't mention it,"—said Roxmouth, hastily—"We would not disturb her for the world! The fact is, we called to see Miss Vancourt——"

"Yes?" queried Miss Fosby, gently, taking up her embroidery again, and carefully setting her needle into the petal of a rosebud she was designing—"Dear girl! She left here yesterday."

"Rather sudden, wasn't it?" said Longford.

Miss Fosby looked up placidly, and smiled. She had a touch of humour about her as well as much 'early Victorian' sentiment, and she was just now enjoying herself.

"I think not! Young women like change and travel. Maryllia has always been accustomed to go abroad in August. The first time Lady Wicketts and I ever met her, she was travelling with her aunt. Oh no, I don't think it is at all sudden!"

"Where has she gone?" asked Roxmouth, affecting as much ease and lightness of manner as he could in putting the question.

Miss Fosby smiled a little more.

"I really don't know,"—she replied, with civil mildness—"I fancy she has no settled plans at all. She has kindly allowed Lady Wicketts and myself the use of the Manor for three weeks."

"Till she returns?" suggested Longford.

This time Miss Fosby laughed.

"Oh no! When *we* leave it, the Manor is to be shut up again for quite a long time—probably till next summer."

"Miss Bourne has gone with her friend, I suppose?"

"No,"—and Miss Fosby sought carefully among her embroidery silks for some special tint of colour—"Little Cicely and Monsieur Gigue, her master, went away together only this morning."

"Well, I suppose Miss Vancourt's letters will be forwarded on somewhere!"—said Roxmouth, unguardedly. Miss Fosby's back stiffened instantly.

"Really, my lord, I know nothing about that,"—she said, primly—"Nor should I ever make it my business to enquire."

There was an awkward pause after this, and though Longford skilfully changed the subject of conversation to generalities, the rest of the interview was fraught with considerable embarrassment. Miss Fosby was not to be 'drawn.' She was distinctly 'old-fashioned,'—needless therefore to add that she was absolutely loyal to her absent friend and hostess.

Leaving the Manor, Lord Roxmouth and his tame pussy sought for information in other quarters with equal futility. The agent, Mr. Stanways, 'knew nothing.' His orders were to communicate all his business to Miss Vancourt's solicitors in London. Finally the last hope failed them in Julian Adderley. They found that young gentleman as much taken aback as themselves by the news of Maryllia's departure. He had been told nothing of it. A note from Cicely Bourne had been brought to him that morning by one of the gardeners at the Manor—and he showed this missive to both Roxmouth and Longford with perfect frankness. It merely ran: "Good-bye Moon-calf! Am going away. No time to see you for a fond farewell! Hope you will be famous before I come back. Enclosed herewith is my music to your 'Little Rose Tree.' GOBLIN."

This, with the accompanying manuscript score of the song alluded to was all the information Julian could supply,—and his own surprise and consternation at the abrupt and unexpected termination of his pleasant visits to the Manor, were too genuine to be doubted.

"It is positively remote!" he said, staring vaguely at his visitors—"Too remote for realisation! Mr. Walden has gone away too."

Roxmouth started.

"Mr. Walden?"

"Yes." And Julian looked surprised at the other's hasty tone,—"But only to see his Bishop. He will preach here as usual on Sunday."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Longford, sharply scanning Julian's flabby face, green-grey eyes and ruddy locks with sudden suspicion—"Or is it only a blind?"

"A blind?" And Adderley lifted his shoulders to the lobes of his ears and spread out his hands in flat amazement,—"What do you mean, most obscure Marius? For what purpose should a blind be used? Mr. Walden is the last person in the world to wish to cover his intentions, or disguise his motives. He is the sincerest man I ever met!"

Longford glanced at his patron for instructions. Was Adderley to be told of the 'amorous entanglement' of Miss Vancourt? Roxmouth frowned at him warningly, and he understood his cue.

"Well, if you hear any news from the Manor, you can let us know,"—he said—"You are quite aware of the position——"

"Quite!" murmured Julian, lazily.

"And if you want to get on, you will hardly find a better friend than Lord Roxmouth,"—pursued Longford, with meaning emphasis—"He has made many a man famous!"

"Oh, my dear Longford!—pray do not speak of these things!"—interrupted Roxmouth, with an air of gentlemanly humility. "Merit always commands my interest and attention—and Mr. Adderley's talent as a poet——naturally——!" Here he waved his hand and allowed the sentence to finish itself.

Julian looked at him thoughtfully.

"Thanks! I *think* I see what you mean!"—he said slowly—"But I'm afraid I am not a useful person. I never have been useful in my life—neither to myself, nor to anybody else. To be useful would be new—and in some cases, fresh,"—here he smiled dubiously—"Yes—very fresh!—and delightful! But I fear—I very much fear that I shall always 'lack advancement' as Hamlet says—I can never accommodate myself to other people's plans. You will excuse my inabilities?"

Roxmouth flushed angrily. He understood. So did Marius Longford—resolving in his own mind that whenever, *if* ever, a book of poems appeared by Julian Adderley, he would so maul and pounce upon it in the critical reviews,

that there should not be a line of it left unmangled or alive. They parted with him, however, on apparently excellent terms.

Returning to Badsworth Hall they found no further news awaiting them than they had themselves been able to obtain. Sir Morton's fussy enquiries had brought no result—Miss Tabitha had scoured the neighbourhood in her high dogcart, calling on the Ittlethwaites and Mandeville Porehams, all in vain. Nobody knew anything. Nobody had heard anything. The sudden exit of Maryllia from the scene took everyone by surprise. And when Miss Pippitt began to hiss a scandalous whisper concerning John Walden, and a possible intrigue between him and the Lady of the Manor, the 'county' sat up amazed. Here indeed was food for gossip! Here was material for 'local' excitement!

"Old Tabitha's jealous!—that's what it is!" said Bruce Ittlethwaite of Ittlethwaite Park, to his maiden sisters,—"Ha-ha-ha! Old green-and-yellow Tabitha is afraid she'll lose her pet parson! Dammit! A pretty woman always starts this kind of nonsense. If it wasn't the clergyman, it would be somebody else—perhaps Sir Morton himself—or perhaps me! Ha-ha-ha! Dammit!"

"I don't believe a word of it!" declared the eldest Miss Ittlethwaite,—"I do not attend Mr. Walden's services myself, but I am quite sure he is an excellent man—and a perfect gentleman. Nothing that Tabitha Pippitt can ever say, will move me on that point!"

"I always had my suspicions!"—said Mrs. Mandeville Poreham, severely, when she in her turn heard the news—"I heard that Miss Vancourt had insisted—positively *insisted* on Mr. Walden's visiting her nearly every day, and I trembled for him! *My* girls have gone quite crazy about Miss Vancourt ever since they met her at Sir Morton Pippitt's garden-party, but *I* have *never* changed my opinion. *My* poor mother always taught me to be firm in my convictions. And Miss Vancourt is a designing person. There's no doubt of it. She affects the innocence of a child—but I doubt whether I have ever met anyone *quite* so worldly and artful!"

So the drops of petty gossip began to trickle,—very slowly at first, and then faster and faster, as is their habitude in the effort to wear away the sparkling adamant of a good name and unblemished reputation. The Reverend Putwood Leveson, vengefully brooding over the wrongs which he considered he had sustained at the hands of Walden, as well as Julian Adderley, rode to and fro on his bicycle from morn till dewy eve, perspiring profusely, and shedding poisonous slanders almost as freely as he exuded melted tallow from his mountainous flesh, aware that by so doing he was not only ingratiating himself with the Pippitts, but also with Lord Roxmouth, through whose influence he presently hoped to 'get a thing or two.' Mordaunt Appleby, the Riversford brewer, and his insignificant spouse, irritated at never having had the chance to 'receive' Lord Roxmouth, were readily pressed into the same service and did their part of scandal-mongering with right goodwill and malignant satisfaction. And in less than forty-eight hours' time there was no name too bad for the absent Maryllia; she was 'mixed up' with John Walden,—she had 'tried to entangle him'—there had been 'a scene with him at the Manor,'—she was 'forward,' 'conceited'—and utterly lost to any sense of propriety. Why did she not marry Lord Roxmouth? Why, indeed! Many people could tell if they chose! Ah yes!—and with this, there were sundry shakings of the head and shruggings of the shoulders which implied more than whole volumes of libel.

But while the county talked, the village listened, sagaciously incredulous of mere rumour, quiescent in itself and perfectly satisfied that whoever else was wrong, 'Passon Walden' in everything he did, said, or thought, was sure to be right. Wherefore, until they heard their 'man o' God's' version of the stories that were being so briskly circulated, they reserved their own opinions. The infallibility of the Supreme Pontiff was not more securely founded in the Roman Catholic Ritual than the faith of St. Rest in the 'gospel according to John.'

CHAPTER XXVII

MEANWHILE Walden himself, ignorant of all the 'local' excitement so suddenly stirred up in his tiny kingdom, had arrived on a three days' visit at the house, or to put it more correctly, at the palace, of his friend Bishop Brent. It was, in strict reality a palace, having been in the old days one of the residences of Henry VII. Much of the building had been injured during the Cromwellian period, and certain modern repairs to its walls had been somewhat clumsily executed, but it still retained numerous fine old mullioned windows, and a cloistered court of many sculptured arches still eminently beautiful, though grey and crumbling under the touch of the melancholy vandal, Time. The Bishop's study had formerly been King Henry's audience chamber, and possessed a richly-wrought ceiling of interlaced oak rafters, and projecting beams smoothly polished at the ends and painted with royal emblems, from which projections no doubt, in early periods, many a banner of triumph had floated and many a knightly pennon. Bishop Brent was fond of this room, and carefully maintained its ancient character in the style of its furniture and general surroundings. The wide ingle-nook and high carved chimney-piece, supported by two sculptured angel-figures of heroic size, was left unmodernised, and in winter the gaping recess was filled with great logs blazing cheerily as in olden times, but in summer, as now, it served as a picturesque setting for masses of rare flowers which, growing in pots, or cut freshly and set in crystal vases, were grouped together with the greatest taste and artistic selection of delicate

colouring, forming, as it seemed, a kind of blossom-wreathed shrine, above which, against the carved chimney itself, hung a wonderfully impressive picture of the Virgin and Child. Placed below this, and slightly towards the centre of the room, was the Bishop's table-desk and chair, arranged so that whenever he raised his head from his work, the serene soft eyes of Mary, Blessed among Women, should mystically meet his own. And here just now he sat at evening, deep in conversation with John Walden, who with the perfect unselfishness which was an ingrained part of his own nature, had for the time put aside or forgotten all his own little troubles, in order to listen to the greater ones of his friend. He had been shocked at the change wrought in seven years on Brent's form and features. Always thin, he had now become so attenuated as to have reached almost a point of emaciation,—his dark eyes, sunk far back under his shelving brows, blazed with a feverish brilliancy which gave an almost unearthly expression to his pale drawn features, and his hand, thin, long, and delicate as a woman's, clenched and unclenched itself nervously when he spoke, with an involuntary force of which he was himself unconscious.

"You have not aged much, Walden!" he said, thoughtfully regarding his old college chum's clear and open countenance with a somewhat sad smile—"Your eyes are the same blue eyes of the boy that linked his arm through mine so long ago and walked with me through the sleepy old streets of 'Alma Mater!' That time seems quite close to me sometimes—and again sometimes far away—dismally, appallingly, far away!"

He sighed. Walden looked at him a little anxiously, but for the moment said nothing.

"You give me no response,"—continued Brent, with sudden querulousness—"Since you arrived we have been talking nothing but generalities and Church matters. Heavens, how sick I am of Church matters! Yet I know you see a change in me. I am sure you do—and you will not say it. Now you never were secretive—you never said one thing and meant

another—so speak the truth as you have always done! I *am* changed, am I not?"

"You are,"—replied Walden, steadily—"But I cannot tell how, or in what way. You look ill and worn out. You are overworked and overwrought—but I think there is something else at the root of the evil;—something that has happened during the last seven years. You are not quite the man you were when you came to consecrate my church at St. Rest."

"St. Rest!" repeated the Bishop, musingly—"What a sweet name it is—what a still sweeter suggestion! Rest—rest!—and a saint's rest too!—that perfect rest granted to all the martyrs for Christ!—how safe and peaceful!—how sure and glorious! Would that such rest were mine! But I see nothing ahead of me but storm and turmoil, and stress of anguish and heartbreak, ending in—Nothingness!"

Walden bent a little more forward and looked his friend full in the eyes.

"What is wrong, Harry?" he asked, with exceeding gentleness.

At the old schoolboy name of bygone years, Brent caught and pressed his hand with strong fervour. A smile lighted his eyes.

"John, my boy, everything is wrong!" he said—"As wrong as ever my work at College was, before you set it right. Do you think I forget! Everything is wrong, I tell you! I am wrong,—my thoughts are wrong,—and my conscience leaves me no peace day or night! I ought not to be a Bishop—for I feel that the Church itself is wrong!"

John sat quiet for a minute. Then he said—

"So it is in many ways. The Church is a human attempt to build humanity up on a Divine model, and it has its human limitations. But the Divine model endures!"

Brent threw himself back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"The Divine model endures—yes!" he murmured—"The Divine foundation remains firm, but the human building totters and is insecure to the point of utter falling and destruction!" Here, opening his eyes, he gazed dreamily at the

pictured face of the Madonna above him. "Walden, it is useless to contend with facts,—and the facts are, that the masses of mankind are as unregenerate at this day as ever they were before Christ came into the world! The Church is powerless to stem the swelling tide of human crime and misery. The Church in these days has become merely a harbour of refuge for hypocrites who think to win conventional repute with their neighbours by affecting to believe in a religion not one of whose tenets they obey! Blasphemy, rank blasphemy, Walden! It is bad enough in all conscience to cheat one's neighbour, but an open attempt to cheat the Creator of the Universe is the blackest crime of all, though it be unnamed in the criminal calendar!"

He uttered these words with intense passion, rising from his seat, and walking up and down the room as he spoke. Walden watched his restless passing to and fro, with a wistful look in his honest eyes. Presently he said, smiling a little—

"You are my Bishop—and I should not presume to differ from you, Brent! *You* must instruct *me*,—not I you! Yet if I may speak from my own experience——"

"You may and you shall!"—replied Brent, swiftly—"But think for a moment, before you speak, of what that experience has been! One great grief has clouded your life—the loss of your sister. After that, what has been your lot? A handful of simple souls set under your charge, in the loveliest of little villages,—souls that love you, trust you and obey you. Compared with this, take *my* daily life! An over-populated diocese—misery and starvation on all sides,—men working for mere pittances,—women prostituting themselves to obtain food—children starving—girls ruined in their teens—and over it all, my wretched self, a leading representative of the Church which can do nothing to remedy these evils! And worse than all, a Church in which some of the clergy themselves who come under my rule and dominance are more dishonourable and dissolute than many of the so-called 'reprobates' of society whom they are elected to admonish! I tell you, Walden, I have some men under my jurisdiction whom I

should like to see soundly flogged!—only I am powerless to order the castigation—and some others who ought to be serving seven years in penal servitude instead of preaching virtue to people a thousand times more virtuous than themselves!"

"I quite believe that!" said Walden, smiling—"I know one of them!"

The Bishop glanced at him, and laughed.

"You mean Putwood Leveson?" he said—"He seems a mischievous fool—but I don't suppose there is any real harm in him, is there?"

"Real harm?"—and John flared up in a blaze of wrath—"He is the most pernicious scoundrel that ever masqueraded in the guise of a Christian!"

The Bishop paused in his walk up and down, and clasping his hands behind his back, an old habit of his, looked quizzically at his friend. A smile, kindly and almost boyish, lightened the grey pallor of his worn face.

"Why, John!" he said—"you are actually in a temper! Your mental attitude is evidently that of squared fists and 'Come on!' What has roused the slumbering lion, eh?"

"It doesn't need a lion to spring at Leveson,"—said Walden, contemptuously—"A sheep would do it! The tamest cur that ever crawled would have spirit enough to make a dash for a creature so unutterably mean and false and petty! I may as well admit to you at once that I myself nearly struck him!"

"You did?" And Bishop Brent's grave dark eyes flashed with a sudden suspicion of laughter.

"I did. I know it was not Churchman-like,—I know it was a case of 'kicking against the pricks.' But Leveson's 'pricks' are too much like hogs' bristles for me to endure with patience!"

The Bishop assumed a serious demeanour.

"Come, come, let me hear this out!" he said—"Do you mean to tell me that you—you, John—actually struck a brother minister?"

"No—I do not mean to tell you anything of the kind, my Lord Bishop!" answered Walden, beginning to laugh. "I say that I 'nearly' struck him,—not quite! Someone else came on the scene at the critical moment, and did for me what I should certainly have done for myself had I been left to it. I cannot say I am sorry for the impulse!"

"It sounds like a tavern brawl,"—said the Bishop, shaking his head dubiously—"or a street fight. So unlike you, Walden! What was it all about?"

"The fellow was slandering a woman,"—replied Walden, hotly—"Poisoning her name with his foul tongue, and polluting it by his mere utterance—contemptible brute! I should like to have horsewhipped him——"

"Stop, stop!" interrupted the Bishop, stretching out his thin long white hand, on which one single amethyst set in a plain gold ring, shone with a pale violet fire——"I am not sure that I quite follow you, John! What woman is this?"

Despite himself, a rush of colour sprang to Walden's brows. But he answered quite quietly.

"Miss Vancourt,—of Abbot's Manor."

"Miss Vancourt!" Bishop Brent looked, as he felt, utterly bewildered. "Miss Vancourt! My dear Walden, you surprise me! Did I not write to you—do you not know——"

"Oh, I know all that is reported of her,"—said John, quickly—"And I remember what you wrote. But it's a mistake, Brent! In fact, if you will exonerate me for speaking bluntly, it's a lie! There never was a gentler, sweeter woman than Maryllia Vancourt,—and perhaps there never was one more basely or more systematically calumniated!"

The Bishop took a turn up to the farther end of the room. Then he came back and confronted Walden with an authoritative yet kindly air.

"Look me straight in the face, John!"

John obeyed. There was a silence, while Brent scanned slowly and with appreciative affection the fine intellectual features, brave eyes, and firm, yet tender mouth of the man whom he had, since the days of their youth together, held

dearest in his esteem among all other men he had ever known, while Walden, in his turn, bore the sad and searching gaze without flinching. Then the Bishop laid one hand gently on his shoulder.

"So it has come, John!" he said.

Then and then only the brave eyes fell,—then and then only the firm mouth trembled. But Walden was not the man to shirk any pain or confusion to himself in matters of conscience.

"I suppose it has!" he answered, simply.

The Bishop sat down, and, seemingly out of long habit raised his eyes to the blandly smiling Virgin and Child above him.

"I am sorry!"—he murmured—"John, my dear old fellow, I am very sorry——"

"Why should you be sorry?" broke out Walden, impetuously, "There is nothing to be sorry for, except that I am a fool! But I knew *that* long ago, even if you did not!"—and he forced a smile—"Don't be sorry for me, Brent!—I'm not in the least sorry for myself. Indeed, if I tell you the whole truth, I believe I rather like my own folly. It does nobody any harm! And after all it is not absolutely a world's wonder that a decaying tree should, even in its decaying process, be aware of the touch of spring. It should not make the tree unhappy!"

The Bishop raised his eyes. They were full of a deep melancholy.

"We are not trees—we are men!" he said—"And as men, God has made us all aware of the love of woman,—the irresistible passion that at one time or another makes havoc or glory of our lives! It is the direst temptation on earth. Worst of all and bitterest it is when love comes too late,—too late, John! —I say in your case, it comes too late!"

John sighed and smiled.

"Love—if it has come to me at all—is never too late,"—he said, with quiet patience,—"My dear Brent, don't you understand? This little girl—this child—for she is nothing more than that to a man of my years—has slipped into my life

by chance, as it were, like a stray sunbeam—no more! I feel her brightness—her warmth—her vitality—and my soul is conscious of an animation and gladness whenever she is near, of which she is the sole cause. But that is all. Her pretty ways—her utter loneliness,—are the facts of her existence which touch me to pity, and I would see her cared for and protected,—but I know myself to be too old and too unworthy to so care for and protect her. I want her to be happy, but I am fully conscious that I can never make her so. Would you call this kind of chill sentiment 'love'?".

Brent regarded him steadfastly.

"Yes, John! I think I should!—yes, I certainly should call 'this chill sentiment' love! And tell me——have you never got out of your depth in the water of this 'chill sentiment,' or found yourself battling for dear life against an outbreak of volcanic fire?"

Walden was silent.

"I never thought,"—continued the Bishop, rather sorrowfully,—"when I wrote to you about the return of Robert Vancourt's daughter to her childhood's home, that she would in any serious way interfere with the peace of your life, John! I told you just what I had heard—no more. I have never seen the girl. I only know what people say of her. And that is not altogether pleasing."

"Do you believe what people say?" interrupted Walden, suddenly,—"Is it not true that when a woman is pretty, intelligent, clean-souled and pure-minded, and as unlike the rest of 'society' women as she can well be, she is slandered for having the very virtues her rivals do not possess?"

"Quite true!"—said Brent—"and quite common. It is always the old story—'Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny.' Do not imagine for a moment, John, that I am going to run the risk of losing your friendship by repeating anything that may have been said against the reputation or the character of Miss Vancourt. I have always prayed that no woman might ever come between us,"—and here a faint tinge of colour warmed the pallor of his

face—"And, so far, I fancy the prayer has been granted. And I do not think that this—this—shall we call it glamour, John?—this glamour of the imagination and the senses, will overcome you in any detrimental way. I cannot picture you as the victim of a 'society' siren!"

John smiled. A vision rose up before his eyes of a little figure in sparkling white draperies—a figure that bent appealingly towards him, while a soft childlike voice said—'I'm sorry! Will you forgive me?' The tender lines round his mouth deepened and softened at the mental picture.

"She is not a society siren,"—he said, gently—"Poor little soul! She is a mere woman, needing what woman best thrives upon—love!"

"Well, she has been loved and sought in marriage for at least three years by Lord Roxmouth,"—said the Bishop.

"Has *she* been loved and sought, or her aunt's millions?" queried Walden—"That is the point at issue. But my dear Brent, do not let us waste time in talking over this little folly of mine—for I grant you it is folly. I'm not sorry you have found it out, for in any case I had meant to make a clean breast of it before we parted,"—he hesitated—then looked up frankly—"I would rather you spoke no more of it, Harry! I've made my confession. I admit I nearly struck Leveson for slandering an innocent and defenceless woman,—and I believe you'll forgive me for that. Next, I own that though I am getting into the sere and yellow leaf, I am still conscious of a heart,—and that I feel a regretful yearning at times for the joys I have missed out of my life—and you'll forgive me for that too,—I know you will! For the rest, draw a curtain over this little weakness of mine, will you? I don't want to speak of it—I want to fight it and conquer it."

The Bishop stretched out a hand and caught Walden's in a close grasp.

"Right!"—he said—"Do that, and you will do well! It is all a question of fighting and conquering, or—being conquered. But *you* will never give in, John! You are not the man to yield to the wiles of the devil. For there *is* a devil!—

I am sure of it!" And his dark eyes flashed with a sudden wild light. "A cozening, crafty, lurking devil, that sets temptation before us in such varied and pleasing forms that it is difficult—sometimes impossible—to tell which is right and which is wrong! Walden, we must escape from this devil—we must escape!"

He sprang up with an impulsive quickness which startled Walden, and began to pace up and down the room again.

"A mocking devil,"—he said—"a lying devil!—whispering from morning till evening, and from evening till morning, doubts of God! Doubts whether He, the Creator of worlds, really exists,—doubts as to whether He, or It, is not some huge blind, deaf Force, grinding its way on through limitless and eternal Production and Reproduction to one end,—Annihilation! Walden, you must now hear *my* confession! These doubts are driving me mad! I cannot bear the thought of the whirl of countless universes, immeasurable solar systems, crammed with tortured life for which there seems to be no hope, no care, no rescue, no future! I am unable to preach or to *feel* comfort for the human race! The very tragedy of the Cross only brings me to one result—that Truth is always crucified. The world prefers Falsehood. So much so indeed that the Christian religion itself is little more than a superstructure of lies raised above the sepulchre of a murdered Truth. I told you in my letter I had serious thoughts of resigning my bishopric. So I have. My spirit turns to Rome!"

"Rome!" cried Walden—"What, *you*, Brent!—you think of going over to Rome? What strange fantasy has seized you?"

"Rome," said Brent, slowly, stopping in his restless walk—"is the Mother of Creeds—the antique Muse of the world's history! Filled with the blood of martyrs, hallowed by the memories of saints, she is, she must always be, supreme in matters of faith—or superstition!" And he smiled,—a wan and sorrowful smile—"Or even idolatry, if you will! Emotionalism,—sensationalism in religion—these the craving soul

must have, and these Rome gives! We must believe,—mark you, Walden!—we must positively *believe* that the Creator of all Universes was moved to such wrath against the helpless human creature He had made, that He cursed that creature for ever for merely eating, like a child, fruit which had been forbidden! And after that we must believe everything else that has since followed in the track of the Woman, the Serpent and the Tree. Now in the Church of England I find I cannot believe these things—in the Church of Rome I *will* believe, because I *must*! I will humble myself in dust and ashes, and accept all—all! Anything is better than Nothingness! I will be the lowest of lay brethren, and in solitude and silence, make atonement for my unbelief. It is the only way, Walden!—for me, it is the only way! To Her!" And he pointed up to the picture of the Virgin and Child—"To Her, my vows! As Woman, she will pity me—as Woman, she can be loved!"

Walden heard this wild speech without any word or gesture of interruption. Then, raising his eyes to the picture Brent thus apostrophised, he said, quietly—

"When did you have that painted, Brent?"

A sudden change came over the Bishop's features. He looked as though startled by some vague terror. Then he answered, slowly:

"Some years ago—in Florence. Why do you ask? It is a copy——"

"Of *her* likeness—yes!" said Walden, softly—"I saw that at once. You had it done, of course! She was beautiful and good—she died young. I know! But you have no right to turn your personal passion and grief into a form of worship, Harry!"

The Bishop gazed at him fixedly and solemnly.

"You do not know,"—he murmured—"You have not seen what I have seen! She has come to me lately—she, who died so long ago!—she has come to me night after night, and she has told me to pray for her—'pray' she says—'pray that I may help to save your soul!' And I must surely do as she bids. I must get away from this place—away from this city

of turmoil and wickedness, into some quieter corner of the world,—some monastic retreat where I may end my days in peace,—I cannot fight my devils here—they are too strong for me!"

"They will be too strong for you anywhere, if you are a coward!"—said Walden, impetuously. "Brent, I thought you had gotten the victory over this old despair of yours long ago! I thought you had made the memory of the woman you loved a noble spur to noble actions! I never dreamed that it would be possible for you to brood silently on your sorrow till you made it a cause of protest against God's will! And worst and strangest of all is this frenzied idea of yours to fly to the Church of Rome for shelter from yourself and your secret misery, and there give yourself over to monasticism and a silent, idolatrous worship,—not of Mary, the Mother of Christ,—but of the mere picture of the woman you loved! And you would pray to *that*?—you would kneel before *that*?—you would pass long hours of fasting and vigil, gazing at that face, till, like the 'stigmata,' it is almost outlined in blood upon your heart? My dear Brent, is it possible your brain is so shaken and your soul so feeble that you must needs seek refuge in a kind of half-spiritual, half-sensuous passion, which is absolute rank blasphemy?"

At this the Bishop raised his head with an air of imperious authority.

"I cannot permit! . . ." he said, in unsteady accents—— "You have no right to speak to me in such a tone—it is not your place——"

Then, suddenly, his voice broke, and throwing himself into his chair, he dropped his head forward on the desk and covered it with his hands in an attitude of the utmost abandonment and dejection. The moisture rose to Walden's eyes,—he knew the great tragedy of his friend's life—all comprised in one brief, romantic episode of the adoring love, and sudden loss of a beautiful woman drowned by accident in her own pleasure-boat on the very eve of her marriage with him,—and he knew that just as deep and ardent as the man's passion had

been, so deep and ardent was his sorrow—a sorrow that could never be consoled. And John sat silent, deeply moved in himself, and ever and anon glancing upwards at the exquisite face of the painted Virgin above him,—the face of the dead girl whom her lover had thus sanctified. Presently Brent raised his head,—his face was white and worn—his eyes were wet.

"Forgive me, John!" he said—"I have been working hard of late, and my nerves are unstrung. And—I cannot, I cannot forget her! And what is more awful and terrible to me than anything is that I cannot forgive God!" He uttered these words in an awed whisper. "I cannot! I bear the Almighty a grudge for wrenching her life away from mine! Of what use was it to be so cruel? Of what purpose to kill one so young? If God is omnipotent, God could have saved her. But He let her die! I tell you, Walden, that ever since I have been Bishop of this diocese, I have tried to relieve sorrow and pain whenever I have met with it—I have striven to do my duty, hoping against hope that perhaps God would teach me—would explain the why and wherefore of so much needless agony to His creatures—and that by discovering reasons for the afflictions of others, I should learn to become reconciled to my own. But no!—nothing has been made clear! I have seen innocent women die in the tortures of the damned—while their drunken husbands have lived to carouse over their coffins. Children,—mere babes—are afflicted with diseases for which often no cause can be assigned and no cure discovered—while over the whole sweltering mass of human helplessness and ignorance, Death stalks triumphant,—and God, though called upon for rescue with prayers and tears, withdraws Himself in clouds of impenetrable silence. It is all hopeless, useless, irremediable! That is why my thoughts turn to Rome—I say, let me believe in *something*, if it be only a fairy tale! Let me hear grand music mounting to heaven, even if human words cannot reach so high!—let me think that guardian angels exist, even if there is nothing in space save a blind Chance spawning life particles uselessly,—let my soul and senses feel the touch of something

higher, vaster, purer and better than what the Church of England calls Christianity at this present day!"

"And that 'something higher, vaster, purer and better'—would you call it the Church of Rome?" asked Walden.

"In suggestion,—in emotion and poetic inspiration, yes!"—said Brent—"In theory and in practice, no!"

There was a pause. Walden sat for a few moments absorbed in anxious thought. Then he looked up with a cheerful air.

"Harry," he said—"Will you do me a favour? Promise that you will postpone the idea of seceding, or as you put it, 'returning' to Rome, for six months. Will you? At the end of that time we'll discuss it again."

The Bishop looked uneasy.

"I would rather do what has to be done at once,"—he said.

"Then I must talk to you straightly,"—continued John, bracing himself up, and squaring his shoulders resolutely—"I must forget that you are my Bishop, and speak just as man to man. All the facts of the case can be summed up in one word—Selfishness! Pure Selfishness, Harry!—and I never thought I should have had to convict you of it!"

Brent drew himself slowly up in his chair.

"Selfishness!" he echoed, dreamily — "I can take anything from you, John! — I did at college, — but—selfishness——"

"Selfishness!" repeated John, firmly—"You have had to suffer a grief—a great grief,—and because it was so sudden, so tragic and overwhelming, you draw a mourning veil of your own across the very face of God! You try to rule your diocese by the measure of your own rod of affliction. And, finding that nothing is clear to you, because of your own obstructive spirit, you would set up a fresh barrier between yourself and Eternal Wisdom, by deserting your post here, and separating yourself from all the world save the shadow of the woman you yourself loved! Harry, my dear old friend, unless I had heard this from your own lips, I should never have believed it of you!"

Brent sat heavily in his chair, sunk in a brooding melancholy.

"'The heart knoweth its own bitterness'!"—he murmured wearily—"Your reproaches are just,—I know I deserve them, but they do not rouse me. They do not stir one pulse in my soul! What have *I* learned of Eternal Wisdom?—what have *I* seen? Nothing but cruelty upon cruelty dealt out, not to the wicked, but to the innocent! And because I protest against this, you call my spirit an obstructive one?—well!—it may be so! But, Walden, you have never loved!—you have never felt all your life rush like a river to the sea of passion!—not low, debasing passion, but passion born of vitality, ardour, truth, hope, sympathy!—such emotion as most surely palpitates through the whole body of the natural creation, else there would be naught created. God Himself—if there be a God—must be conscious of Love! Do we not say: 'God *is* Love'?—and this too while we suffer beneath His heavy chastisements which are truly more like Hate! I repeat, Walden, you have never loved,—till now perhaps—and even now you are scarcely conscious of the hidden strength of your own feelings. But suppose—just for the sake of argument—suppose this 'little girl' as you call her, Maryllia Vancourt, were to die suddenly, would you not, as you express it, 'draw a mourning veil of your own across the face of God'?"

Walden started as though suddenly wounded. 'If Maryllia were to die!' He shuddered as the mere thought passed across his brain. 'If Maryllia were to die!' Why then—then the world would be a blank—there would be no more sunshine!—no roses!—no songs of birds!—nothing of fairness or pleasure left in life—not for him, whatever there might be for others. Was it possible that her existence meant so much to him? Yes, it meant so much!—it had come to mean so much! He felt his old friend's melancholy eyes upon him, and looking up met their searching scrutiny with a serious and open frankness.

"Honestly, I think I should die myself, or lose my senses!"—he said—"And honestly, I hardly realised this,—

which is just as much selfishness on my part as any of which I hastily accused you,—till you put it to me. I will not profess to have a stoicism beyond mortal limits, Harry, nor should I expect such from you. But I *will* say, that despite our human weakness, we must have courage!—we are not men without it. And whether faith stands fast or falters, whether God seems far off or very near, we must face and fight our destiny—not run away from it! You want to run away,"—and he smiled gravely—"or rather, just in the present mood of yours you think of doing so—but I believe it is only a mood—and that you will not, after putting your hand to the plough, turn back because of the aridness or ungratefulness of the soil,—that would not be like you. If one must needs perish, it is better to perish at one's post of duty than desert over to the enemy."

"I am not sure that Rome is an enemy;"—said the Bishop, musingly.

To this Walden gave no reply, and the conversation fell into other channels. But, during the whole time of his visit, John was forced to realise, with much acute surprise and distress, that constant brooding on grief,—and excessive spiritual emotion of an exalted and sensuous kind, with much perplexed pondering on human evils for which there seemed no remedy, had produced a painful impression of life's despair and futility on Brent's mind,—an impression which it would be difficult to eradicate, and which would only be softened and possibly diminished by tenderly dealing with it as though it were an illness, and gradually bringing about restoration and recovery through the gentlest means. Though sometimes it was to be feared that all persuasion would be useless, and that the scandalous spectacle of an English Bishop seceding to the Church of Rome would be exhibited with an almost theatrical effect in his friend's case. For the ornate ritual which the Bishop maintained in his Cathedral services was almost worthy of a Mass at St. Peter's. The old, simple chaste English style of 'Morning Prayer' was exchanged for 'Matins,'—choristers perpetually chanted and sang,—crosses

were carried to and fro,—banners waved—processions were held—and the 'Via Crucis' was performed by a select number of the clergy and congregation every Friday.

"I never have this sort of thing in my church,"—said Walden, bluntly, on one occasion—"My parishioners would not understand it."

"Why not teach them to understand it?" asked the Bishop, dreamily. They were standing together in the beautiful old Cathedral, now empty save for their presence, and Brent's eyes were fixed with a kind of sombre wistfulness on a great gold crucifix set up on the altar.

"Teach them to understand it?" echoed Walden, with a touch of sorrow and indignation—"You are my Bishop, but if you commanded me to teach them these 'vain repetitions' prohibited by the Divine Master, I should disobey you!"

The Bishop flushed red.

"You disapprove?"

"I disapprove of everything that tends to put England back again into the old religious fetters which she so bravely broke and cast aside,"—said John, warmly—"I disapprove of all that even hints at the possibility of any part of the British Empire becoming the slave of Rome!"

Brent gave a weary gesture.

"In religious matters it is wiser to be under subjection than free,"—he said, with a sigh—"In a state of freedom we may think as we please—and freedom of thought breeds doubt,—whereas in a state of subjection we think as we *must*, and so we are gradually forced into an attitude of belief. The spread of atheism among the English is entirely due to the wild liberty of opinion allowed them by their forms of faith."

"I do not agree with you!"—declared Walden, firmly—"The spread of atheism is due, not to freedom of opinion, nor forms of faith, but simply to the laxity and weakness of the clergy."

The Bishop looked at him with a smile.

"You always speak straight out, John!" he said—"You always did! And strange to say, I like you all the better for it. I could, if I chose, both reprove and command you—but I

will do neither. You must take your own way, as you always have done. But there is a flavour of Rome even in your little church of St. Rest,—your miracle shrine,—your unknown saint in the alabaster coffin. You and your parishioners kneel before that every Sunday."

"True—but we do not kneel to *It*,—nor do we pray through It,"—replied Walden—"It stays in the chancel because it was found in the chancel. But it does not make 'a miracle shrine' as you say,—there is nothing miraculous about it."

"If it contains the body of a Saint,"—said the Bishop, slowly—"it *must* be miraculous! If, in the far-gone centuries, the prayers and tears of sorrowful human beings have bedewed that cold stone, some efficacy, some tenderness, some vitality, born of these prayers and tears, must yet remain! Walden, we preach the supernatural—do we not believe in it?"

"The Divine supernatural — yes!" answered Walden,—"But——"

The Bishop interrupted him by a gesture of his delicate hand.

"There are no 'buts' in the matter, John,"—he said, quietly—"What is supernatural is so by its own nature. The Divine is the Human, the Human is the Divine. In all and through all things the Spirit moves and makes its way. Our earth and ourselves are but particles of matter, worked by the spirit or essence of creative force. This spirit we can neither see nor touch, therefore we call it supernatural. But it permeates all things,—the stone as completely as the flower. It circulates through that alabaster sarcophagus in your church, as easily as through your own living veins. Hence, as I say, if the mortal remains of a saint are enshrined within that reliquary, the spirit or 'soul' enveloping it *may* work 'miracles,' for all we dare to know!" He paused, and looking kindly at Walden's grave and somewhat troubled face, added—"Some day, when we are in very desperate straits, John, we will see what your saint can do for us!"

He smiled. Walden returned the smile, but nevertheless was conscious of a sorrowful sense of regret at what he con-

sidered his friend's leaning towards superstitious observances and idolatrous ceremonies. At the same time he well knew that any violent opposition on the subject would be worse than useless in the Bishop's present mood. He therefore contented himself with, as he mentally said, 'putting in the thin end of the wedge'—and,—carefully steering clear of all controversial matters,—contrived in a great measure to reassert the old magnetic sway he had been wont to exercise over Brent's more pliable mind when at college—so that before they parted, he had obtained from him a solemn promise that there should be no 'secession' or even preparation for secession to Rome, till six months had elapsed.

"And if you would only put away that picture,"—said Walden, earnestly, pointing towards the 'Virgin and Child'—"Or rather, if you would have another one painted of the sweet woman you loved as she really was in life, it would be wiser and safer for your own peace."

The Bishop shook his head.

"The Virgin and Child are a symbol of all humanity,"—he said—"Mother and Son,—Present and Future! Woman holds the human race in her arms—at her breast!—without her, Chaos would come again! And for me, all Womanhood is personified in that one face!"

He raised his eyes to the picture with an almost devout passion—and then abruptly turned away. The conversation was not renewed again between them, but when Walden parted from his friend, he had the satisfaction of knowing that he left him in a brighter, more hopeful and healthful condition, cheered, soothed and invigorated by the exchange of that mutual confidence and close sympathy which had linked their two lives together in boyhood, and which held them still subtly and tenderly responsive to each other's most intimate emotions as men.

CHAPTER XXVIII

ARRIVING home at his own domain late on the Saturday night, Walden had no opportunity to learn anything of the incidents which had occurred during his brief absence. Letters were waiting for him, but he opened none, and shut himself up in his study at once to prepare his next day's sermon. He wrote on far into the night, long after all the servants of his household had retired to rest, and overslept himself the next morning in consequence, therefore his preparations for the eleven o'clock service were necessarily somewhat hurried, and he had not time to say more than a cheery 'Good-morning' even to Bainton, whom he passed on his way into the church, or to Adam Frost, though he fancied that both men looked at him somewhat curiously, as with an air of mingled doubt and enquiry. Once within the sacred building he was conscious of an exceptionally crowded congregation. None that he could see were missing from their usual places. Maryllia certainly was not there,—but as she was admittedly not a church-goer, he did not expect her to be present. Badsworth Hall was entirely unrepresented, much to his relief; neither Sir Morton Pippitt nor Lord Roxmouth, nor Mr. Marius Longford was anywhere visible. Old Josey Letherbarrow sat in his usual corner,—everything was precisely the same as it was wont to be—and yet a sense of vague trouble oppressed him,—he saw, or thought he saw, an expression on some of the faces of his parishioners which was new to him, and he felt instinctively that some disturbing element had found its way into the peace of the village, though what the

trouble could be, he was at a loss to imagine. He chose as his text: 'What went ye out for to see? A reed shaken with the wind?' and preached thereon with wonderful force, simplicity, eloquence and fervour—though all the time he spoke he wondered why his people stared at him so persistently, and why so many round eyes in so many round faces appeared to express such a lively, not to say questioning curiosity.

After service, however, the whole mystery was cleared up. Bainton, in his Sunday best, with hat in hand, presented himself at the garden gate on his master's return from the church to the rectory, and after a word or two was admitted into the study. Bainton, honest as the daylight, and sturdy in his principles as an oak in its fibres, had determined to have 'no humbuggin' wi' Passon.' And in a few words, spoken with a great deal of feeling and rough eloquence, he had told all,—how Miss Vancourt had gone away 'suddint-like' from the Manor,—and how it was said and reported all through the county and neighbourhood that she had gone because her engaged husband, Lord Roxmouth, had caught her 'makin' love' to a parson, that parson being no other than St. Rest's own beloved 'man o' God,' John Walden. And that Lord Roxmouth had at once gone after her, and that neither of the twain 'weren't never comin' back no more.' So said Bainton, twirling his cap round, and fixing his eyes sympathetically on his master's face,—eyes as faithful as those of the dog Nebbie, who clambered at his master's knee, equally gazing up at him with a fondness exceeding all speech.

John Walden sat, white and rigid, in his chair and heard the tale out to its end.

"Is that all?" he asked, when Bainton had concluded.

"That's all, an' ain't it enough, Passon?" queried Bainton in somewhat dismal accents. "Not that I takes in 'arf wot I hears, but from the fust I sez you should know every bit on it, an' if no one else 'ad the 'art or the pluck to tell ye straight out, I'd tell ye myself. For that old Miss Tabitha's got a tongue as long as a tailor's yard-measure wot allus measures a bit off to 'is own good, an' Sir Morton Pippitt he do

nothin' but run wild-like all over the place a-talkin' of it everywhere, an' old Putty Leveson, he's up at the 'All, day in, an' day out, tellin' 'ow you was goin' to hit 'im in the eye—hor-hor-hor!—an' why didn't ye do it, Passon?—'twould a' been a real Gospel mercy!—an' 'ow 'twas all about Miss Vancourt, till Mr. Hadderley 'e come up an' throwed 'im over in the road on 'is back which makes me think all the better o' that young man, 'owsomever, I never took to 'im afore. But though he's all skin an' bone an' long 'air as red as a biled carrot, he's got a fist of 'is own, that's pretty plain, an' if he knocked down old Putty Leveson it shows 'e's got some sense in 'im as well as sperrit. For it's all over the place that there's trouble about Miss Vancourt, an' you may take my wurrd for it, Passon, they don't leave the poor little leddy alone, nor you neither, an' never takes into their minds as 'ow you're old enough to be 'er father. That Miss Tabitha don't spare no wurrds agin 'er—an' as ye know, Passon, *she's* a leddy wot's like curdled cream all gone wrong in a thunderstorm. Anyways, I thought it best to tell ye straight out an' no lyin' nor trickin',—an' if I've stepped over my dooty, I 'umbly axes pardin, but I means well, Passon,—I means well,—I do reely now!"

Walden looked up,—his eyes were glittering—his lips were pale and dry.

"I know—I know!"—he said, speaking with an effort—"You're an honest fellow, Bainton!—and—and—I thank you! You not only mean well—you have done well. But it's a lie, Bainton!—it's all a wicked, damnable lie!"

He sprang to his feet as he said this, the wrath in his eyes flashing a steel-like lightning.

"It's a lie!" he repeated—"Do you understand? A cruel, abominable lie!"

Bainton twirled his cap sympathetically.

"So it be, Passon,"—he murmured—"So it be—I know'd that all along! It's a lie set goin' by that fine gentleman-rascal, Lord Roxmouth, wot can't get Miss Maryllia and 'er aunt's money nohow. Lor' bless ye, I sees that plain enough! But

take it 'ow we will, a lie's a nasty sort o' burr to stick to a good name, 'speshully a name like yours, Passon,—an' when it comes to that I feel that moithered an' worrited-like not knowin' 'ow to pick the burr off again. An' Lord Roxmouth he be gone away or mebbe you could a' had it out wi' him——"

"That will do, Bainton!"—said Walden, interrupting him by a gesture—"Say no more about it, please! I'm glad you've spoken,—I'm glad I know! But,—let it rest there! Never allude to it again!"

Bainton glanced up timorously at his master's pale set face.

"Ain't nothin' goin' to be done?" he faltered anxiously—"Nothin' to say as 'ow it's all a lie——"

"Nothing on my part!"—said Walden, quickly and sternly, "The best answer to such low gossip and slander is silence. You understand?"

His look was a command, and Bainton felt it to be such. Shuffling about a little, he murmured something about the 'apples comin' on fine in the orchard'—as if Walden's three days' absence had somehow or other accelerated their ripening, and then slowly and reluctantly retired, deeply dejected in his own mind.

"For silence gives consent,"—he argued dolefully with himself—"That's copybook truth! Yet o' coorse 'tain't to be expected as Passon would send for the town-crier from Riversford to ring a bell through the village an' say as 'ow he 'adn't nothin' to do with Miss Vancourt nor she with 'im. Onny the worst of it is that in this wurrld lies is allus taken for truth since the beginnin', when the Sarpint told the fust big whopper in the Garden of Eden an' took in poor silly Eve. An' ye can't contradict a lie somehow without makin' it look more a truth than ever,—that's the way o' the thing. An' it do stick!—Passon himself 'ull find that out,—it do stick, it do reely now!"

Meantime, Walden, left alone, gave himself up to a tumult of misery and self-torture. His sensitive nature shrank from

the breath of vulgar scandal like the fine frond of delicate foliage from the touch of a coarse finger. He had never before been associated with the faintest rumour of it,—his life had been too simple, too austere, and too far removed from all the trumpery shows and petty intrigues of society. He felt himself now in a manner debased by having had to listen with enforced patience to Bainton's rambling account of the gossip going on in the neighbourhood, and despite that worthy servitor's disquisition on the subject, he could not imagine how it had arisen, unless his quarrel with Putwood Leveson were the cause. It was all so sudden and unlooked for! Maryllia had gone away,—and that fact of itself was sufficient to make darkness out of sunshine. He could not quite realise it. And not only had she gone away, but some slanderous story had been concocted concerning her in connection with himself, which was being bandied about on all the tongues of the village and county. How it had arisen he could not understand. He was, of course, unaware of the part Lord Roxmouth had played in the matter, and in his ignorance of the true source of the mischief, tormented his mind with endless fancies and perplexities, all of which helped to increase his annoyance and agitation. Pacing restlessly up and down his study, his eyes presently fell on the little heap of letters which had accumulated on his table during his brief absence, all as yet unopened. Turning them over indifferently, he came suddenly on one small sealed note, inscribed as having been left 'by hand,' addressed to him in the bold frank writing to which he had once, not so very long ago, felt such an inexplicable aversion when Mrs. Spruce was the recipient of a first letter from the same source. Now he snatched the little missive up with a strangely impulsive ardour, and being quite alone, indulged himself in the pleasure of kissing the firm free pen-strokes with all the passion of a boy. Then opening it, he read:

"Dear Mr. Walden,—You will be surprised to find that I have gone away from the dear home I love so well, and I

daresay you will think me very capricious. But please do not judge me hastily, or believe everything you may hear of me from others. I am very sorry to go away just now, but circumstances leave me no other choice. I should like to have bidden you good-bye, as I could perhaps have explained things to you better, but old Josey Letherbarrow tells me you have gone to see the Bishop on business, so I leave this note myself just to say that I hope you will think as kindly of me as you can now I am gone. Please go into the Manor gardens as often as you like, and let the sick and old people in the village have plenty of the flowers and fruit. By doing this you will please me very much. My agent, Mr. Stanways, will be quite at your service if you ever want his assistance. Perhaps I ought just to mention that Lord Roxmouth overheard our conversation in the picture-gallery that night of the dinner-party. He was very rude about it. I tell you this in case you should see him, but I do not think you will. Good-bye! Try to forget that I smoked that cigarette!—Your sincere friend,

"MARYLLIA VANCOURT."

As he perused these lines, Walden alternately grew hot and cold—red and pale. All was clear to him now!—it was Lord Roxmouth who had played the spy and eavesdropper! He recalled every little detail of the scene in the picture-gallery and at once realised how much a treacherous as well as jealous and vindictive man could make of it. Maryllia's hand laid so coaxingly on his arm,—Maryllia's face so sweetly and pleadingly upturned,—Maryllia's half-tender tremulous voice with its 'Will you forgive me?'—and then—his own impetuous words!—the way he had caught her hand and kissed it!—why, his very look must have betrayed him to the 'noble and honourable' detective, part of whose distinguished rôle it was to listen at doors and afterwards relate to an inquisitive and scandal-loving society all that he heard within. By degrees he grasped the whole situation. He realised that his name and honour lay at the mercy of this man Roxmouth, who under the circumstances of the constant check put upon his

mercenary aims, would certainly spare no pains to injure both. And he felt sick at heart.

Locking Maryllia's note carefully in his desk, he stepped into his garden and walked up and down the lawn slowly with bent head, Nebbie trotting after him with a sympathetically disconsolate air. And gradually it dawned upon him that Maryllia had possibly—nay very probably—gone away for his sake,—to make things easier for him—to remove her presence altogether from his vicinity—and so render Roxmouth's tale-bearing, with its consequent malicious gossip, futile, till of itself it died away and was forgotten. As this idea crossed his mind and deepened into conviction, his eyes filled with a sudden smarting moisture.

"Poor child!" he said, half aloud—"Poor little lonely child!"

Then a fresh thought came to him,—one which made the blood run more quickly through his veins and caused his heart to pulsate with quite a foolish joy. If—if she had indeed gone away out of a sweet womanly wish to save him from what she imagined might cause him embarrassment or perplexity, then—then surely she cared! Yes—she must care for him greatly as a friend,—though only as a friend—to be willing to sacrifice the pleasure of passing all the summer in the old home to which she had so lately returned, merely to relieve him of any difficulty her near society might involve. If she cared! Was such a thing—could such a thing be possible? Tormented by many mingled feelings of tenderness, regret and pain, John pondered his own heart's problem anxiously, and tried to decide the best course to pursue,—the best for her—the best for himself. He was not long in coming to a decision, and once resolved, he was more at ease.

When he celebrated the evening service that Sunday the garrulous Bainton saw, much to his secret astonishment, that the effect of his morning's communication had apparently left no trace on his master's ordinary demeanour, except perhaps to add a little extra gravity to his fine strong features, and accentuate the reserve of his accustomed speech and manner.

His habitual dignity was even greater than usual,—his composed mien and clear steadfastness of eye had lost nothing of their quelling and authoritative influence,—and so far as his own manner and actions showed, the absence or presence of Miss Vancourt was a matter to him of complete unconcern. His visit to his friend the Bishop had 'done 'im a power o' good'—said his parishioners, observing him respectfully, as, Sunday being over and the week begun, he went about among them on his accustomed round of duty, enquiring after the poultry and the cattle with all the zeal expected of him. The name of Miss Vancourt seldom passed his lips,—when other people spoke of her, either admiringly, questioningly or suggestively, he merely listened, offering no opinion. He denied himself to all 'county' visitors on plea of press of work,—he never once went to Abbot's Manor or entered the Manor grounds—and the only persons with whom he occasionally interchanged hospitalities were Julian Adderley and the local doctor, 'Jimmy' Forsyth. Withdrawing himself in this fashion into closer seclusion than ever, his life became almost hermit-like, for except in regard to his daily parish work, he seldom or never went beyond the precincts of his own garden.

Days went on, weeks went on,—and soon, too soon, summer was over. The melancholy autumn shook down the once green leaves, all curled up in withering death-convulsions, from the branches of the trees now tossing in chill wind and weeping mists of rain. No news had been received by anyone in the village concerning Maryllia. The 'Sisters Gemini,' Lady Wicketts and Miss Fosby, had departed from Abbot's Manor when the time of their stay had concluded, and neither of the twain had given the slightest hint to any enquirer, as to the probable date of the return of the mistress of the domain. Sir Morton Pippitt at last got tired of talking scandal for which there seemed no visible or tangible foundation, and even his daughter Tabitha began to wonder whether after all there was not some exaggeration in the story Lord Roxmouth had given her to sow like rank seed upon the soil of daily

circumstance? She never saw Walden by any chance,—on one occasion she ventured to call, but he was 'out' as usual. Neither could she persuade Julian Adderley to visit at Badsworth Hall. A veil of obscurity and silence was gradually but surely drawn between St. Rest and the outlying neighbourhood so far as its presiding ruler John Walden was concerned, while within the village his reticence and reserve were so strongly marked that even the most privileged person in the place, Josey Letherbarrow, awed at his calm, cold, almost stern aspect, hesitated to speak to him except on the most ordinary matters, for fear of incurring his displeasure.

Meanwhile the village sorely missed the bright face and sweet ways of 'th' owld Squire's gel'—and many of the inhabitants tried to get news of her through Mrs. Spruce, but all in vain. That good lady, generally so talkative, was for once in her life more than discreetly dumb. All that she would say was that she "didn't know nothink. Miss Maryllia 'ad gone abroad an' all 'er letters was sent to London solicitors. Any other address? No—no other address. The servants was to be kep' on—no one wasn't goin' to lose their places if they behaved theirselves, which please the Lord, they will do!"—she concluded, with much fervour. Bennett, the groom, was entrusted with the care of the mares Cleo and Daffodil, and might be seen exercising them every day on the open moors beyond the village, accompanied by the big dog Plato,—and so far as the general management of affairs was concerned, that was ably undertaken by the agent Stanways, who though civil and obliging to all the tenantry, had no news whatever to give respecting the absence or the probable return of the lady of the Manor. The Reverend Putwood Leveson occasionally careered through the village on his bicycle, accompanied by Oliver Leach who bestrode a similar machine, and both individuals made a point of grinning broadly as they passed the church and rectory of St. Rest, jerking their fingers and thumbs at both buildings with expressively suggestive contempt.

And by and by the people began to settle down into the

normal quietude which had been more or less their lot, before Maryllia, with her vivacious little musical protégée Cicely Bourne had awakened a new interest and animation in the midst of their small community,—and they began to resign themselves to the idea that her 'whim' for residing once more in the home of her childhood had passed, and that she would now, without doubt, marry the future Duke of Ormistoune, and pass away from the limited circle of St. Rest to those wider spheres of fashion, the splendours of which mere country-folk are not expected to have more than the very faintest glimmering conception. Even in that independent corner of opinion, the tap-room of the 'Mother Huff' her name was spoken with almost bated breath, though Mr. Netlips was not by any means loth to spare any flow of oratorical eloquence on the subject.

"I think, Mr. Buggins," he said one evening, addressing 'mine host' with due gravity—"I think you will recall to your organisation certain objective propositions I made with regard to Miss Vancourt, when that lady first entered into dominative residence at Abbot's Manor. Personally speaking, I have no discrepancies to suggest beyond the former utterance. Matters in which I have taken the customary mercantile interest have culminated with the lady to the satisfaction of all sides. Nothing has been left standing controversially on my books. Nevertheless it would be repudiative to say that I have sophisticated my previous opinion. I said then, and I confirm the observation, that a heathen cannot enjoy the prospective right of the commons."

"I s'pose,"—said Mr. Buggins, meditatively in reference to this outburst—"you means, Mr. Netlips, that Miss Vancourt is a kind of heathen?"

Mr. Netlips nodded severely.

"'Cos she don't go to church?" suggested Dan Ridley, who as usual was one of the tap-room talkers.

Again Mr. Netlips nodded.

"Well," said Dan, "she came to church once an' brought her friends——"

"Late,—very late,"—interposed Mr. Netlips, solemnly—"The tardiness of her entrance was marked by the strongest decorum. The strongest, the most open decorum! Deplorable decorum!"

"What's decorum?" enquired Mr. Buggins, anxiously.

Mr. Netlips waved one fat hand expressively.

"Decorum,"—he said—"is—well!—decorum!"

Buggins scratched his head dubiously. Dan Ridley looked perplexed. There was a silence,—the men listening to the wailing of a rising wind that was beginning to sweep round the house and whistle down the big open chimney, accompanied by pattering drops of rain.

"Summer's sheer over,"—said a labourer, lifting his head from his tankard of ale—"Howsomever, we're all safe this winter in the worst o' weather. Rents are all down at 'arf what they was under Oliver Leach, thanks to the new lady, so whether she's a decorum or not don't matter to me. She's a right good sort—so here's to her!"

And he drained off his ale at one gulp with a relish, several men present following his example.

"Passon Walden,"—began Dan Ridley—"Passon Walden——"

But here there was a sudden loud metallic crash. Buggins had overturned two empty pewter-mugs on his counter.

"No gossiping o' Passon Walden allowed 'ere,"—he said,—"Not while I'm master o' this public!"

"Leeze majestas,"—proclaimed Mr. Netlips, impressively—"You're right, Buggins—you're quite right! Leeze majestas would be entirely indigenous—entirely so!"

An awkward pause ensued. 'Leeze majestas' in all its dark incomprehensibility had fallen like a weight upon the tavern company, and effectually checked any further conversation. It was one of those successful efforts of Mr. Netlips, which, by its ponderous vagueness and inscrutability, produced an overwhelming effect. There was nothing to be said after it.

The gold and crimson glory of autumn slowly waned and died,—and the village began to look very lonely and dreary.

Heavy rains fell and angry gales blew,—so that when dark November came glooming in, with lowering skies, there was scarcely so much as a leaf of russet or scarlet Virginian creeper clinging to roof or wall. The woods around Abbot's Manor were leafless except where the pines and winter laurel grew in thick clusters, and where several grand old hollies showed their scarlet berries ripening among the glossy green. The Manor itself however looked wide-awake and cheerful,—smoke poured up from the chimneys and glints of firelight sparkled through the windows,—all the shutters, which had been put up after the departure of the 'Sisters Gemini,' were taken down —blinds were raised and curtains drawn back,—and as soon as these signs and tokens were manifested, people were not slow in asking Mrs. Spruce whether Miss Vancourt was coming back for Christmas? But to all enquiries that estimable dame gave the same answer. She 'didn't know nothink.' The groom Bennett was equally reticent. He had received 'no orders.' Mr. Stanways, the agent, and his wife, both of whom had become very friendly with all the villagers, were cheerfully talkative on every subject but one,—that of Miss Vancourt and her movements. All they could or would say was that her return was 'quite uncertain.' Fires were lighted in the Manor—oh yes!—to keep the house well aired—and windows were opened for the same purpose,—but beyond that—'really,' said Mr. Stanways, smiling pleasantly—'I can give no information!'

The days grew shorter, gloomier and colder,—and soon, when the chill nip of winter began to make itself felt in grim damp earnest, the whole county woke up from the pleasant indolence into which the long bright summer had steeped it, and responded animatedly to the one pulse of vitality which kept it going. The hunting season began. Old, otherwise dull men, started up into the semblance of youth again, and sprang to their saddles with almost as much vigour and alertness as boys,—and Reynard with his cubs ruled potently the hour. The first 'meet' of the year was held at Ittlethwaite Park,—and for days before it took place nothing

else was talked of. Hunting was really the one occupation of the gentry of the district,—everything else distinctly 'bored' them. Many places in England are entirely under the complete dominion of this particular form of sport,—places, where, if you do not at least talk about hunting and nothing *but* hunting, you are set down as a fool. Politics, art, literature,—these matters brought into conversation merely excite a vacuous stare and yawn,—and you may consider yourself fortunate if, in alluding to such things at all, you are not considered as partially insane. To obtain an ordinary reputation for common-sense in an English hunting county, you must talk horse all day and play Bridge all night,—then and then only will you have earned admission into these 'exclusive' circles where the worth of a quadruped exceeds the brain of a man.

The morning of the meet dawned dully—yet now and then the sun shone fitfully through the clouds, lighting up with a cold sparkle the thick ivy, wet with the last night's rain, which clung to the walls of Walden's rectory. There was a chill wind, and the garden looked bleak and deserted, though it was kept severely tidy, Bainton never failing to see that all fallen leaves were swept up every afternoon and all weeds 'kep' under.' But there was no temptation to saunter down the paths or across the damp lawn in such weather, and Walden, seated by a blazing fire in his study, with Nebbie snoozing at his feet, was sufficiently comfortable to be glad that no 'parochial' duties called him forth just immediately from his warm snuggery. He had felt a little ailing of late—'the oncoming of age and infirmity,' he told himself, and he looked slightly more careworn. The strong restraint he had imposed upon himself since he knew the nature of the scandal started by Lord Roxmouth, and the loyal and strict silence he had maintained on the subject that was nearest and dearest to his own heart, had been very trying to him. There was no one to whom he could in any way unburden his mind. Even to his closest friend, Bishop Brent, he had merely written the briefest of letters, informing him that Miss Vancourt had left Abbot's Manor for a considerable time,—but no more than this. He

longed passionately for news of Maryllia, but none came. The only person to whom he sometimes spoke of her, but always guardedly, was Julian Adderley. Julian had received one or two letters from Cicely Bourne,—but they were all about her musical studies, and never a word of Maryllia in them. And Julian was almost as anxious to know what had become of her as Walden himself, the more so as he heard constantly from Marius Longford who never ceased urging him to try and discover her whereabouts. Which request proved that, for once, Lord Roxmouth had been foiled, and that even he with all his various social detectives at work, had lost all trace of her.

On this particular morning of the opening of the hunting season, Walden sat by the fire reading,—or trying to read. He was conscious of a great depression,—a 'fit of the blues,' which he attributed partly to the damp, lowering weather. Idly he turned over the leaves of a first edition of Tennyson's poems,—pausing here and there to glance at a favourite lyric or con over a well-remembered verse, when the echo of a silvery horn blown clear on the wintry silence startled him out of his semi-abstraction. Rising, he went instinctively to the window, though from that he could see nothing but his own garden, looking blank enough in its flowerless condition, the only bright speck in it being a robin sitting on a twig hard by, that ruffled its red breast prettily and blinked its trustful eye at him with a friendly air of sympathy and recognition. He listened attentively for a moment and heard the approaching trot and gallop of horses,—then suddenly recalling the fact that the hounds were to meet that day at Ittlethwaite Park, he took his hat and went out to see if any of the hunters were passing by.

A wavering mass of colour gleamed at the farther end of the village as he looked down the winding road;—scarlet coats, white vests and buckskin breeches showed bravely against the satiny brown and greys of a fine group of gaily prancing steeds that came following after the huntsmen, the hounds and the whippers-in, and a cheery murmur of pleasant voices, broken with an occasional musical ring of laughter, dispersed for a

time the heaviness of the rainy air. Something unusually pleasant seemed to animate the faces of all who composed the hunting train as they came into view,—Miss Arabella Ittlethwaite, for example, portly of bulk though she was, sat in her saddle with an almost mirthful lightness, her good-natured fat face all smiles,—while her brother Bruce, laughing heartily over something which had evidently tickled his fancy, looked more like thirty than sixty, so admirably did his 'pink' become him, and so excellently well did he ride. Walden saluted them as they passed, and they gave him a pleasant 'good-day.' But,—what was that sudden flash of deep purple, which the fitful sun, peering sulkily through grey clouds, struck upon quickly with a slanting half-smile of radiance? What—and who was the woman riding lightly, with uplifted head like a queen, in the midst of the company, surrounded by all the younger men of the neighbourhood who, keeping their horses close on either side of her, appeared to be trying to outrival each other in eager attentions, in questions and answers, in greetings and hat-liftings, and general exchange of courtesies? Walden rubbed his eyes, and gazed and gazed,—anon his heart gave a wild leap, and he felt himself growing deadly pale. Had the portrait of 'Mary Elia Adelgisa de Vaignecourt' in Abbot's Manor come visibly to life?—or was it, could it be indeed,—Maryllia?

He would gladly have turned away, but some stronger force than his own held him fast where he stood, stricken with surprise, and a gladness that was almost fear. The swaying gleam of purple came nearer and nearer, and resolved itself at last into definite shape,—Maryllia's face, Maryllia's eyes! Almost mechanically he half opened his gate as all the hunters went trotting by, and she alone reined in her mare 'Cleopatra' and spoke to him.

"How do you do, Mr. Walden!"

He looked up—and looking, smiled. What a child she was after all!—full of quaint vanities surely, and naïve coquetry! For her riding-dress was the exact copy of that worn by her pictured ancestress 'Mary Elia,'—even to the three-cornered

hat and the tiny rose fastened in the bodice which was turned back with embroidered gold *revers*,—so that the 'lady in the vi'let velvet' appeared before him as it were, re-incarnated,—and the pouting lips, sweet eyes and radiant hair were all part of the witch-glamour and mystery! Mastering his thoughts with an effort, he raised his hat in his usual quietly courteous way.

"This is a great surprise, Miss Vancourt!" he said, lightly, though his voice trembled a little—"And a happy one! The villagers will be delighted to see you back again! When did you return?"

"Last night,"—she answered, fixing her frank gaze fully upon him and noting with a sharp little pang of compunction that he looked far from well—"I felt I *must* be here for the first meet of the season! I've been staying in an old convent on the Breton coast,—such a dear quaint place! And I think,"—here she nodded her pretty head wisely—"I *think* I've brought you enough stained glass to quite finish your rose-window! I've been busy collecting it ever since I left here. Gently, Cleo!—gently, my beauty!"—this, as her mare pawed the ground restlessly and sprang forward—"Come and see me to morrow, Mr. Walden! I shall expect you!"

Waving her gloved hand she cantered off and rejoined the rest of the hunters going on ahead. Once she turned in her saddle and looked back,—and again waved her hand. The sun came out fully then, and sweeping aside the grey mists, shed all its brightness on the graceful figure in the saddle, striking a reflex of rose from the soft violet riding-dress, and sparkling against the rippling twists of gold-brown hair,—then,—as she disappeared between two rows of leafless trees,—withdrew itself again frowningly and shone no more that day.

Walden re-entered his house, hardly able to sustain the sudden joy that filled him. He felt himself trembling nervously, and was angry at his own weakness.

"I am more foolish than any love-sick boy!" he said to himself with inward remonstrance—"And God knows I am old enough to know better! But I cannot help being glad

she has come home!—I cannot help it! For with her presence it seems to me that 'the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, and the time of the singing of birds is come'! She is so full of life and brightness!—we shall know nothing of dull days or gloomy skies in St. Rest if she stays with us,—though perhaps for me it might be wiser and safer to choose the dull days and gloomy skies rather than tempt my soul with the magical light of an embodied spring in winter-time! But I shall be careful,—careful of myself and of her,—I shall guard her name in every way, on my side—and if—if I love her, she shall never know!"

He resumed his former seat by the study fire, and again took up his volume of Tennyson. And opening the book at hazard, his glance fell on that exquisite 'Fragment' which perhaps excels in its own way all the 'Idylls of the King'—

"As she fled fast thro' sun and shade,
The happy winds upon her play'd,
Blowing the ringlet from the braid:
She look'd so lovely as she sway'd
    The rein with dainty finger-tips.
A man had given all other bliss,
And all his worldly worth for this,
To waste his whole heart in one kiss
    Upon her perfect lips."

"Quite true!" he said, as he read the lines half aloud, a tender smile lighting up the gravity of his deep thoughtful eyes—"True to the life, so far as the Guinevere of to-day is concerned! But let the simile stop there, John, my boy! Don't carry it any further! Don't deceive yourself as to your own demerits! You are nothing but an old-fashioned country parson—a regular humdrum, middle-aged fogey!—that's what you are!—so, even though you *have* fallen in love (which at your time of life is a folly you ought to be ashamed of), don't for Heaven's sake imagine yourself a Lancelot, John!—it won't do!"

CHAPTER XXIX

OVER the moist ground, and under the bare branches that dripped slow tears of past rain, the brilliant hunting train swept onward, Maryllia riding in the midst, till they came out on a bare stretch of moorland covered with sparse patches of gorse and fir. Here they all paused, listening to the cry of the huntsman in the bottoms, and watching the hounds as they drew up wind.

The eyes of every man present wandered now and again to Maryllia in admiration,—none of them had ever seen her look so lovely, so bright, so entirely bewitching. She was always at her best in the saddle. When she had paid her first visit to America with her uncle and aunt as a girl of sixteen, she had been sent for the benefit of her health to stay with some people who owned a huge Californian 'ranch,' and there she learned to ride on horses that were scarcely broken in, and to gallop across miles and miles of prairie, bareheaded to the burning sun, and had, in such pastime, felt the glorious sense of that savage and splendid freedom which is the true heritage of every child of nature,—a heritage too often lost in the tangled ways of over-civilisation, and seldom or never regained. The dauntless spirit of joyous liberty was in her blood,—she loved the fresh air and vigorous exercise, and was a graceful, daring rider, never knowing what it was to feel a single pulse of fear. Just now she was radiantly happy. She was glad to be at home again,—and still more glad that her plans for eluding the pursuit of Lord Roxmouth had completely succeeded. He had been left

absolutely in the dark as to her whereabouts. His letters to her had been returned unanswered, through her solicitors, who declined to make any statement with regard to her movements, and, growing weary at last of fruitless enquiry, he had left England to winter in Egypt with a party of wealthy friends, her aunt, Mrs. Fred Vancourt, being among the number. She owed this pleasing news to Louis Gigue, who had assisted her in her flight from the persecution of her detested wooer. Gigue had, through his influence, managed to introduce her under an assumed name, as a friend of his own to certain poor nuns in a Brittany convent, who were only too willing to receive her as a paying guest for a couple of months, and to ask no questions concerning her. There she had stayed with exemplary patience and resignation,—lonely indeed, yet satisfied to have made good her escape for the time being, and, as she imagined, to have saved John Walden from any possibility of annoyance chancing to him through her, or by her means. She would not consent to have even Cicely with her, lest any accidental clue to her hiding-place might be found and followed.

As soon, however, as she heard that Roxmouth had actually left England, she made haste to return at once to the home she had now learned to love with a deep and clinging affection, and she had timed her reappearance purposely for the first meet of the hunting season. She would show herself, so she resolved, as a free and independent woman to all the county,—and if people had gossiped about her, or were prone to gossip, they would soon find out the error of their ways. Hence the 'creation' of the becoming violet velvet riding-dress, copied from the picture of her ancestress in Abbot's Manor gallery. She had determined to make an 'effective' entrance on the field,—to look as pretty and picturesque as she possibly could, and to show that she was herself and nobody else, bound to no authority save her own.

In this purely feminine ambition she certainly accomplished her end. She was the centre of attraction,—all the members of the Riversford Hunt, dispersed round and about her in

near or distant groups, discussed her in low tones, even while watching the working of the pack, and scanning every yard of open ground for the first sign of a fox. Gradually the crowd of horses and riders increased,—men from the county-town itself, farmers from the more outlying parts of the neighbourhood, and some of the Badsworth Hall tenantry, having arrived too late at Ittlethwaite Park for the actual meet, now came hurriedly galloping up, and among these last was Oliver Leach. It was the first time Maryllia had seen her dismissed agent since her rescue of the Five Sister beeches, and she had thought of him so little that she would not have recognised him now had not his horse, a vicious-looking restive creature, started plunging close to her own hunter 'Cleopatra,' and caused that spirited animal to rear almost upright on her haunches. In the act of reining the mare out of his way she looked at him, while he, in his turn stared full at her in evident astonishment. As he appeared gradually to realise her identity, his face, always livid, grew more deeply sallow of hue, and an ugly grin made a gargoyle of his mouth and eyes. She, as soon as she recollected him, remembered at the same time the curse he had flung at her—'a May curse,' she thought to herself with a superstitious little shudder—'and a May curse always begins to work in November, so the gossips say!'

Moved by an instinctive distrust and dislike of the man, she turned her back upon him, and patting Cleopatra's neck, cantered quickly ahead to join the rest of the field which was now moving towards another cover, while the hounds ran through some low thickets of brushwood and tangled bracken.

She was in a curious frame of mind, and found her own emotions difficult to analyse. The momentary glimpse she had just had of John Walden had filled her with a strangely tender compassion. Why did he look so worn and worried? Had he missed her? Had her two months and more of absence seemed as long to him as they had to her? She wondered! Anon, she asked herself why she wondered!

What did it matter to her what he thought, or how he passed his days? Then a sudden rush of colour warmed her cheeks, and a light came into her eyes. It *did* matter!—there was no getting away from it,—it did matter very much what he thought, and it had become of paramount importance to her to know how he passed his days!

Deep in her heart a secret sweet consciousness lay nestled,—a consciousness, subtly feminine, which told her that she was held in precious estimation by at least one man,—and that she had advanced towards her most cherished desire of love so far as to have become 'dear to someone else.' And that 'someone else'—who was he? Oh, well!—nobody in particular!—only a country clergyman,—a poor creature, so the world might say, to build romances upon! Yet she was building them fast. One after the other they shaped themselves like cloud-castles in the airy firmament of her dreams, and she permitted herself to dwell on the possible joys they suggested. Very simple joys too!—such as the completion of the rose-window in the church of St. Rest,—he would be pleased if that were done—yes!—she was sure he would be pleased!—and she had managed, during her sojourn in Brittany to secure some of the loveliest old stained glass, dating from the twelfth century, which she meant to give him to-morrow when he came to see her. To-morrow! What a long time it seemed till then! And suppose he did not come? Well, then she would go and see him herself, and would tell him just why she had gone away from home, and why she had not written to him or to anybody else in the neighbourhood,—and then—and then——

Here she started at the sound of a sudden 'tally-ho!'—the hounds had rallied——a fox was 'drawn,'—the whole field was astir, and with a musical blast of the horn, the hunt swept on in a flash of scarlet and white, black, brown and grey, across the moor. Maryllia gave herself up to the excitement of the hour, and galloped along, her magnificent mare 'Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt' scenting sport in the wind and enjoying the wild freedom allowed her by a loose rein

and the light weight she bore. On, on!—with the wet chill perfume of fallen leaves rising from the earth on which the eager hoofs of the horses trampled,—on, always on, in the track of stealthy Reynard, over dips and hollows in the ground, and shallow pools fringed with gaunt sedges and twisted brambles,—on, still on, crossing and re-crossing lines of scent where the hounds appeared for the moment at a loss, till they dashed off again towards the farther woods. Putting her mare to a fence and clearing it easily, Maryllia crossed a meadow, which she knew to be the shortest way to the spot where she could just see the pack racing silently ahead,—and, coming out on one of the high-roads between St. Rest and Riversford, she drew rein for a moment. Several of the hunters had chosen the same short-cut, and came out of the meadow with her, calling a cheery word or two as they passed her and pressed on in the ardour of the chase.

Quickly resuming her gallop, and yielding to the exhilaration of the air and the pleasure of movement, she urged her mare to a pace which would have been deemed reckless by all save the most skilled and daring riders, unaware of the unpleasant fact that she was being closely followed by Oliver Leach. He rode about twenty paces behind her, every now and then gaining on her, and anon pulling back his horse in an apparent desire not to outstrip her. The rest of the hunting party were well ahead, and they had the road to themselves, with the exception of a fat man on a bicycle, who was careering along in front of them, looking something like a ton on wheels. Maryllia soon flew past this moving rotundity, and even if she had had time to look at it, she would not have known that it was the Reverend Putwood Leveson, as she had never seen that gentleman. Catching a glimpse of the hounds, now racing round the edge of a sloping hill, she galloped faster and faster,—while Oliver Leach, with an odd set expression in his face and eyes, and his hat well pulled down on his brows, followed her at an almost equally flying speed. A ploughed field lay between them, and the smooth dark slope of land edged with broken

furze, where the pack could be plainly seen racing for blood. A moderately low, straggling hedge intervened. Such an obstacle was a mere trifle for 'Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt' to clear, and Maryllia put her to it with her usual ease and buoyancy. But now up came Oliver Leach on his ill-formed but powerful beast;—and just as the spirited mare, with her lightly poised rider on her back, leaped the hedge, he set his own animal at precisely the same place in deliberate defiance of all hunting rules, and springing at her like a treacherous enemy from behind, closed on her haunches, and pounded straight over her! Maryllia reeled in her saddle,—for one half second, her blue eyes wide with terror, turned themselves full upon her pursuer—she raised her hand appealingly—warningly—in vain! With a crash of breaking brushwood the mare went down under the plunging hoofs that came thudding so heavily upon her,—there was a quick shriek—a blur of violet and gold hurled to the ground—and then,—then Leach galloped on——alone! He dared not look back! His nerves throbbed—his heart beat high,—and his evil soul rejoiced in its wickedness as only the soul of a devil can.

"Verdict—accidental death!" he muttered, with a fierce laugh—"No doubt it will be thought singular that the daughter should have met the same end as her father! And nothing more will be said. But suppose she is not killed, since every cat has nine lives? No matter, she will be disfigured for life! That will suit me just as well!"

He laughed again, and passed on in the wake of the hunt which had now swept far ahead round the bend of the hill.

Meanwhile, 'Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt,' rendered stunned and dizzy by her fall, began to recover her equine senses. Sniffing the air and opening her wild bright eyes, she soon perceived her loved mistress lying flung about three yards distant from where she herself had rolled over and over on the thick wet clods of the field. With a supreme effort the gallant beast attempted to rise,—and presently, with much plunging and kicking, in which struggles however, she, with an almost

human intelligence pushed herself farther away from that prone figure on the ground so that she might not injure it, she managed to stand upright, quivering in every strained, sore limb. Lifting her head, she whinnied with a melancholy long-drawn plaintiveness, and then with a slow, stiff hobble, moved cautiously closer to Maryllia's fallen body. There she paused and whinnied again, while the grey skies lowered and rain began to ooze from the spreading leaden weight of cloud.

And now assistance seemed near, for the Reverend Putwood Leveson, having had to lead his bicycle up a hill, and being overcome with a melting tallow of perspiration in the effort, hove in sight like an unwieldy porpoise bobbing up on dry land. Approaching the broken gap in the hedge, he quickly spied the mare, and realised the whole situation. Now was the chance for a minister of Christ to show his brave and gentle ministry! He had a flask of brandy in his pocket,—he never went anywhere without it. He felt it, where it was concealed, comfortably pressed against his heart,—then he peered blandly over the hedge at the helpless human creature lying there unconscious. He knew who it was,—who it must be,—for, as he had cycled through the village after the hunt had started, he had heard everyone talking of Miss Vancourt's unexpected return, and how she had been the 'queen' of the meet that morning. Besides, she had passed him on the road, riding at full gallop. He wiped his forehead now and smiled pleasantly.

"Queens are very soon discrowned!"—he said to himself—"And, fortunately, vacant thrones are soon filled! Now if that sneak Walden were here——"

He paused, considering. The remembrance of the indignity he had suffered at the hands of Julian Adderley was ever fresh with him,—an indignity brought about all through the very woman who was now perhaps dying before his eyes, if she was not already dead. Suddenly, pushing his way through the broken hedge, he approached 'Cleopatra' cautiously. The malignant idea entered his brain that if he could make the

animal start and plunge, her hoofs would crush the body of her mistress more surely and completely. Detestable as the impulse was, it came quite naturally to him. He had helped to kill butterflies often—why not a woman? The murderous instinct was the same in both cases. He tried to snatch the mare's bridle-rein, but she jerked her head away from him, and stood like a rock. He could not move her an inch. Only her great soft eyes kindled with a warning fire as he hovered about her,—and a decided movement of one of her hind hoofs suggested that possibly he might have the worst of any attempt to play pranks with her. He paused a moment, considering.

"Oliver Leach came this way,"—he mused—"He passed me almost immediately after she did. Is this his work, I wonder?" Here he drew out his always greasy pocket-handkerchief and wiped his face with as much tender care as though it were a handsome one—"I shouldn't be surprised,"—he continued, in a mild sotto-voce—"I shouldn't be at all surprised if he had arranged this little business! Clever—very! Fatal accidents in the hunting-field are quite common. He knows that. So do I. But I shall find out,——yes!—I shall find out——"

Here he almost jumped with an access of 'nerves'—for 'Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt' suddenly stretched out her long arched neck and whinnied with piteous, beseeching loudness. A pause of intense stillness followed the mare's weird cry,—a stillness broken only by the slow pattering of rain. Then from the near distance came the baying of hounds and a far echo of the hunting horn.

Seized by panic, the Reverend 'Putty' scrambled quickly out of the ploughed field, through the broken hedge and on to the high-road again, where taking himself to his bicycle, he scurried away like a rat from falling timber. He had been on his way to Riversford when he had stopped to look at the little fallen heap of violet and gold,—guarded so faithfully by a four-footed beast twenty times more 'Christian' in natural feeling than his 'ordained' clerical self,—and he now resumed that journey. And though, as he neared the town, he met

many persons of the neighbourhood on foot, in carts, and light-wheeled traps, he never once paused to give news of the accident, or so much as thought of sending means of assistance.

"I am not supposed to have seen anything,"—he said, with a fat smile—"and I am not supposed to know! I shall certainly not be asked to assist at the funeral service. Walden will attend to that!"

He cycled on rapidly, and arriving at Riversford, went to tea with the brewer's wife, Mrs. Mordaunt Appleby, at Appleby House, and was quite fatherly and benevolent to her son, a lumpy child of ten, the future heir to all the malt, hops, barrels, vats, and poisonous chemicals comprising the Appleby estates in this world.

The afternoon closed in coldly and mournfully. A steady weeping drizzle of rain set in. Some of the hunters returned through St. Rest by twos and threes, looking in a woeful condition, bespattered up to their saddles with mud, and feeling, no doubt, more or less out of temper, as, notwithstanding a troublesome and fatiguing run, the fox had escaped them after all. It was about five o'clock, when Walden, having passed a quiet day among his books, and having felt the sense of a greater peace and happiness at his heart than he had been conscious of since the May-day morning of the year, pushed aside his papers, rose from his chair, and, looking out at the dreary weather, wondered if the 'Guinevere' of the hunt had got safely home from her gallop across country.

"She will be wet through,"—he thought—the tender smile that made his face so lovable playing softly round his lips—"But she will not mind that! She will laugh, and brush out her pretty hair all ruffled and wet with the rain,—her cheeks will be glowing with colour, and her lips will be as red as the cherries when they first begin to ripen,—her eyes will be bright with health and vitality,—and life—young life—life full of joy and hope and brightness will radiate from her as the light radiates from the sun. And I shall bask in the luminance of her smile—I, cold and grey, like a burnt-out ember of perished

possibilities,—I shall warm my chill soul at the sweet fire of her presence—I shall see her to-morrow!"

He went to the hearth and stirred the smouldering logs into a bright blaze. He was just about to ring for fresh fuel, when there came a sudden, alarmed knocking at the street door. Somewhat startled, he listened, his hand on the bell. He heard the light step of Hester the housemaid tripping along the passage quickly to answer the imperative summons,—there was a confused murmur of voices—and then a sudden cry of horror,—and a loud burst of sobbing.

"Whist——whist!——be quiet, be quiet!" said a hoarse trembling voice which it was difficult to recognise as Bainton's, "For the Lord's sake, don't make that noise, gel! Think o' Passon!—do'ee think o' Passon! We must break it to 'im gently like——" But the hysterical sobbing broke out again and drowned all utterance.

And still Walden stood, listening. A curious rigidity affected his nerves. Something had happened—but what? His dry lips refused to frame the question. All at once, he roused himself. Taking a couple of strides across his little study he threw open the door and went out into the passage. There stood Hester with her apron thrown over her head, weeping convulsively—while Bainton, leaning against the ivied porch of entrance to the house, was trembling like a woman in an ague fit.

"What's the matter?" said Walden, in a voice of almost peremptory loudness,—a voice that sounded harsh and wild on his own ears—"What—what has happened?"

"Oh-oh—Oh-oh!" wailed Hester—"Oh, Mr. Walden, oh, sir, I can't tell you! I can't indeed!—it's about Miss Vancourt——oh—poor dear little lady!—oh-oh! I can't—I can't say it! I can't!"

"Don't ye try, my gel!" said Bainton, gently—"You ain't fit for't,—don't ye try! Which I might a' known a woman's 'art couldn't abear it,—nor a man's neither!" Here he turned his pale face upon his master, and the slow tears began to trickle down his furrowed cheeks.

"Passon Walden,"—he began, in shaking accents—"Passon Walden, sir, I'm fair beside myself 'ow to tell ye!—but you're a brave man wot knows the ways o' God an' 'ow mortal 'ard they seems to us all sometimes, poor an' rich alike, an' 'ow it do 'appen that the purttiest flowers is the quickest gone, an' the brightest wimin too, for that matter,—an'—an'——" Here his rough halting voice broke into a hoarse sob—"Oh, Passon, it's a blow!—it's a mortal 'ard blow!—she was a dear, sweet lady an' a good one, say what they will, an' 'ow they will—an' she's gone, Passon!—we won't never see her no more!—she's gone!"

A swirling blackness came over Walden's eyes for a moment. He tried to realise what was being said, but could not grasp its meaning. Making a strong attempt to control himself he spoke, slowly and with difficulty.

"Gone? I don't understand you,——I——"

Here, as he stood at the open doorway, he saw in the gathering dusk of evening a small crowd of villagers moving slowly along the road. Some burden was being carried tenderly between them,—it was like a walking funeral. Someone was dead then? He puzzled himself as to who it could be? He was the parson of the parish,—he had received no intimation! And the hour was late,—they must put it off till to-morrow! Yes—till to-morrow, when he would see Maryllia! Startled by the sudden ghastly pallor of his master's face, Bainton ventured to lay a hand on his arm.

"She was found two hours ago,"—he said, in hushed tones—"Up on Farmer Thorpe's ploughed field—all crushed on the clods, an' no one nigh 'er 'cept the mare. An' the mare was as sensible as a 'uman, for she was a-whinnyin' loud like cryin' for 'elp—an' Dr. Forsyth 'e came by in his gig, drivin' 'ome from Riversford an' he 'ad his man with 'im, so 'tween them both, they got some 'elp an' brought 'er 'ome—but I'm feared it's too late!—I'm awesome feared it's too late!"

Walden looked straight down the road, watching the oncoming of the little crowd.

"I think I begin to know what you mean,"—he said, slowly,

"There has been an accident to Miss Vancourt. She has been thrown—but she is not dead! Not dead. Of course not! She could not be!"

As he spoke, he pushed aside Bainton's appealing hand gently yet firmly, and walked out bareheaded like a man in a dream, to meet the little ghost-like procession that was now approaching him nearly. He felt himself trembling violently; had he been called upon to meet his own instant destruction at that moment, he would have been far less unnerved. Low on the wet autumnal wind came the sound of men's murmuring voices, of women's suppressed sobbing;—in the semi-obscurity of fading light and deepening shadow he could discern and recognise the figure of his friend the local doctor, 'Jimmy' Forsyth, who was walking close beside a hastily improvised stretcher composed of the boughs of trees and covered with men's coats and driving-rugs,—and he could see the shadowy shape of 'Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt,' being led slowly on in the rear, her proud head drooping dejectedly, her easy stride changed to a melancholy limping movement,—her saddle empty. And, as he looked, some nerve seemed to tighten across his brows,—a burning ache and strain, as if a strong cord stretched to a tension of acutest agony tortured his brain,—and for a moment he lost all other consciousness but the awful sense of death!—death in the air,—death in the cold rain—death in the falling leaves—death in the deepening gloom of the night,—and death, palpable, fierce and cruel in the solemn gliding approach of that funeral group,—that hearse-like burden of the perished brightness, the joyous innocence, the sunny smile, the radiant hair, the sweet frank eyes—the all of beauty that was once Maryllia! Then, unaware of his own actions, he went forward giddily, blindly and unreasoningly, ——till, coming face to face with the little moving group of awed and weeping people, all of whom halted abruptly at sight of him, he suddenly stretched forth his hands as though they held a book at arm's length, and his voice, tremulous, yet resonant, struck through the hush of sudden silence.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord: he that believeth on Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die!"

A tragic pause ensued. Every face was turned upon him in tearful wonder. Dr. Forsyth came quickly up to him.

"Walden!" he said, in a low tone—"What is this? What are you saying? You are not yourself! Come home!"

But John stood rigidly inert. His tall slight figure, fully erect, looked almost spectral in the mists of the gathering night. He went on reciting solemnly,—

"I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold and not another!"

Here there was a general movement of consternation in the little crowd. Parson Walden was beginning to read the burial service! The men whispered to one another,—and some of the women burst out crying bitterly. Dr. Forsyth became alarmed.

"John!" he said, imperatively—"Rouse yourself, man! You are ill—I see you are ill,—but I cannot attend to you now! Try not to delay me, for God's sake! Miss Vancourt is seriously injured—but I *may* save her life. She is not dead!"

Something snapped like a broken harp-string behind Walden's temples,—the horrible tension was relieved.

"Not dead—not dead?" he muttered—"Not dead? Forsyth, are you sure?"

"Sure!"

His face changed and softened,—a sudden sweet moisture freshened his eyes.

"Thank God!" he murmured.

Then he looked about him like a man suddenly wakened from sleep. He was still unable quite to realise his surroundings or what he had done.

"Forgive me!" he said, pathetically—"I'm afraid I have

been a trouble to you! I've been studying too much this afternoon,—and—and—I don't know why I came out here just now—I'll—I'll go in! Will you let me know how——how——"

Forsyth nodded comprehensively.

"You shall know everything—best or worst—to-morrow,"—he said—"But now go in and lie down, Walden! You want rest!"

At an imperative sign from him, Walden obediently turned away, not daring to look at the men that now passed him, carrying Maryllia's senseless form back to Abbot's Manor, the beloved home from which she had ridden forth so gaily that morning. He re-entered the still open doorway of his rectory, wholly unconscious that his parishioners, deeply affected by his strange and sudden mind-bewilderment, were now all as anxious about him as they were about Maryllia,—he was too dazed to see that the faithful Bainton still waited for him on his own threshold, or that his servant Hester was still crying as though her heart would break. He passed all and everyone—and went straight upstairs to his own bedroom, where he closed and locked the door. There, smiling down upon him was the portrait of his dead sister,—and there too, just above his bed, was an engraving of the tragically sweet Head crowned with thorns, of Guido's 'Ecce Homo.' On this his gaze rested abstractedly. His temples ached and throbbed, and there was a dull cold heaviness at his heart. Keeping his eyes still on the pictured face of Christ, he dropped on his knees, clasped his hands, and tried to pray, but could not. How should he appeal to a God who was cruel enough to kill a bright creature like Maryllia in the very zenith and fair flowering-time of her womanhood!—an innocent happy soul who had no thought or wish to do anyone any harm! And then he remembered his own reproaches to his friend Bishop Brent, whom he had accused of selfishness for allowing his life to be swayed by the memory of an inconsolable sorrow and loss. 'You draw a mourning veil of your own across the very face of God!' So he had said,—and was he not ready now to do the same? Suddenly,

like the teasing refrain of a haunting melody, there came back to his mind the verse he had read that morning:

"As she fled fast thro' sun and shade,
The happy winds upon her play'd,
Blowing the ringlet from the braid:
She look'd so lovely as she sway'd
    The rein with dainty finger-tips.
A man had given all other bliss,
And all his worldly wealth for this,
To waste his whole heart in one kiss
    Upon her perfect lips!"

Over and over these rhymes went, jingling their sweet concord in his brain,—till all at once the strong pressure upon his soul relaxed,—a great sigh escaped his lips—and with the sigh came the sudden breaking of the wave of grief. A rush of scalding tears blinded his eyes—and with a hard sob of agony his head fell forward on his clasped hands.

"Spare me her life, O God!" he passionately prayed—"Oh God, oh God! Save Guinevere!"

CHAPTER XXX

AND now a cloud of heavy sorrow and foreboding hung over the little village. All its inhabitants were oppressed by a dreary sense of helpless wretchedness and personal loss. Maryllia was not dead,—but it was to be feared that she was dying,—slowly, and by inches as it were, yet nevertheless surely. A great specialist had been summoned from London by Dr. Forsyth, and after long and earnest consultation, his verdict upon her case had been well-nigh hopeless. Thereupon Cicely Bourne was immediately sent for, and arrived from Paris in all haste, only to fall into a state of utter despair. For there seemed no possible chance of saving the dear and valuable life of her beloved friend and protectress to whom she owed all her happiness, all her future prospects. And thus confronted with a tragedy more dire and personal than any she had ever pictured in her wildest imaginative efforts, she sat by Maryllia's bedside, hour after hour, day after day, night after night, stunned by grief, watching, weeping, and waiting for the least glimmer of returning consciousness in that unconscious form which lay so terribly inert, like a figure of life-in-death before her, till she became the mere gaunt little ghost of herself, her large melancholy dark eyes alone expressing the burning vital anguish of her soul. A telegram conveying the sad news of her niece's accident had been sent to Mrs. Fred Vancourt at the Gezireh Palace Hotel, Cairo, to which, with the happy vagueness which so often characterises the ultra-fashionable woman, Mrs. Fred had replied direct to Maryllia herself thus:

"So glad to know where you really are at last, but sorry you have met with a spill. Hope you have a good doctor and nurses. Will write on return from expedition to Luxor. Lord Roxmouth much regrets to hear of accident and thinks it lucky you are back in your own home."

Of course this 'sympathetic' message was not read by its intended recipient at the time of its arrival. Maryllia lay blind, deaf and senseless to all that was going on around her, and for many days gave no sign of life whatever, save a faint uneasy breathing and an occasional moan. Cicely was left alone to face all difficulties, to receive and answer all messages and to take upon herself for the time being the ostensible duties of the mistress of Abbot's Manor. She bent her energies to the task, though she felt that her heart must break in the effort,—and with tears blinding her eyes, she told poor Mrs. Spruce, who was quite stupefied by the sudden crash of misfortune that had fallen upon the household, that she meant to try and do her best to keep everything going on just as Maryllia would wish it kept, "till—till—she gets better,"—she faltered sobbingly—"and you will help me, dear Mrs. Spruce, won't you?"

Whereupon Mrs. Spruce took the poor child into her motherly arms, and they both cried and kissed each other, moved by the same common woe.

The Manor was soon besieged with callers. Everyone in the county flocked thither to leave cards, and express their sympathy for the unfortunate mischance that had overtaken the bright creature who had been the cynosure of all eyes for her beauty and grace on the morning of the first fox-hunt of the year. All the ill-natured gossip, all the slanderous tittle-tattle which had been started by Lord Roxmouth and fostered by Miss Tabitha Pippitt, ebbed and died away in the great wave of honest regret and kindly pity that pervaded the whole neighbourhood. Even Sir Morton Pippitt, smitten by compunction for certain selfish motives which had inspired him to serve Lord Roxmouth as a willing tool, was an indefatigable, almost daily enquirer as to Maryllia's condition, for though

pompous, blusterous, and to a very great extent something of a snob, his nature was not altogether lacking in the milk of human kindness like that of his daughter Tabitha. She, still smarting under the jealous conviction that John Walden was secretly enamoured of the lady of the Manor, had heard the strange story of his having so far forgotten his usual self as to wander out bareheaded in the evening air and recite the commencement of the burial service like a man distraught, when Maryllia's crushed body had been brought home, and she thought of it often with an inward rage she could scarcely conceal. Almost,—such was her acrimony and vindictiveness—she wished Maryllia would die.

"Serve her right!" she said to herself, setting her thin lips spitefully together—"Serve her right!"

There are a great many eminently respectable ladies of Miss Tabitha's temperament who always say 'Serve her right,' when a pretty and charming woman, superior to themselves, meets with some misfortune. They regard it as a just dispensation of Providence.

John Walden meanwhile had braced himself to face the worst that could happen. Or rather, as he chose to put it, strength, not his own, had been given him to stand up, albeit feebly, under the shock of unexpected disaster. Pale, composed, punctilious in the performance of all his duties, and patiently attentive to the needs of his parishioners, he went about among them as usual in his own quiet, sympathetic way just as if his heart were not crying out in fierce rebellion against inexorable destiny,—and as if he were not wildly clamouring to be near her whom, now that she was being taken from him, he knew that he loved with an ardour far deeper and stronger than the same passion common to men in the first flush of their early manhood. And though he sent Bainton every day up to the Manor to make enquiries about her, he never went near the place himself. He could not. Brave as he tried to be, he could not meet Cicely Bourne. He knew that one look into the little singer's piteous dark eyes would have broken him down completely.

Every night Dr. 'Jimmy' Forsyth came to the rectory with the latest details respecting Maryllia's condition,—though for weeks there was no change to report. She was suffering from violent concussion of the brain, and was otherwise seriously injured, but Forsyth would not as yet state how serious the injuries were. For he guessed Walden's secret; and was deeply touched by the quiet patience and restrained sorrow of the apparently calm, self-contained man who, notwithstanding his own inward acute agony, never forgot a single detail having to do with the poor or sick of the parish,—who soothed little Ipsie Frost's bewildered grief concerning her 'poor bootiful white lady-love,'—and who sat with old Josey Letherbarrow by his cottage fire, trying as best he could to explain, ay, even to excuse the mysterious ways of divine Providence as apparently shown in the visitation of cruel affliction on the head of a sweet and innocent woman. Josey was a little dazed about it all, and could not be brought to realise that 'th' owld Squire's gel' might never rise from her bed again.

"G'arn with ye!" he said, indignantly, to the melancholy village gossips who came in to see him and shake their heads generally over life and its brief vanities—"Th' Almighty Lord ain't a pulin', spiteful, hoppitty kicketty devil wot ain't sure of 'is own mind! He don't make a pretty thing just to break it agin all for nowt! Didn't ye all come clicketin' to me about the Five Sister beeches, an' ain't they still stannin'? An' Miss Maryllia 'ull stan' too just as fast an' firm as the trees,—you take my wurrd for't! She ain't goin' to die! Why look at me—just on ninety, an' I ain't dead yet!"

But a qualm of fear and foreboding came over him whenever 'Passon' visited him. John's sad face told him more than words could express.

"Ain't she no better, Passon?" he would ask, timidly and tremblingly.

And John, laying his own hand on the old brown wrinkled one, would reply gently,

"No better, Josey! But we must hope,—we must hope always, and believe that God will be merciful!"

"An' if He ain't merciful, what'll we do?" persisted Josey once, with tears in his poor dim eyes.

"We must submit!" answered John, almost sternly—"We must believe that He knows what is wise and good for her—and for us all! And we must live out our lives patiently without her, Josey!—patiently, till the blessed end!—till that peace cometh which passeth all understanding!"

And Josey, looking at him, was awed by the pale spiritual serenity of his features and the tragic human grief of his eyes.

One person in the neighbourhood proved himself a mainstay of help and consolation during this time of general anxiety and suspense, and this was Julian Adderley. He was always at hand, and willing to be of service. He threw his 'dreams' of poesy to the winds and became poet in earnest,—poet in sympathy with others,—poet in kindly thought,—poet in constant delicate ways of solace to the man he had learned to respect above all others, and whose unspoken love and despair he recognised with more passionate appreciation than any grandly written tragedy. He had gone at once to the Manor on Cicely's arrival there, and had laid himself, metaphorically so to speak, at her feet. When she had first seen him, all oppressed by the weight of her sorrow as she was, she had burst out crying, whereat he had, without the slightest hesitation or embarrassment, taken her in his arms and kissed her. Neither he nor she seemed the least surprised at the spontaneity of their mutual caress,—it came quite naturally. "It was so new—so fresh!" said Julian afterwards. And from that eventful moment, he had installed himself more or less at the Manor, under Cicely's orders. He wrote letters for her, answered telegrams, drew up a formal list of 'Callers' and 'Enquiries,' kept accounts, went errands for the two trained nurses who were in day and night attendance on the unconscious invalid upstairs, and made himself generally useful and reliable. But his 'fantastic' notions were the same as ever. He would not, as he put it, 'partake of food' at the Manor while its mistress was lying ill,—nor would he allow any servant in the household to wait upon him. He merely came and

went, quietly to and fro, giving his best services to all, and never failing to visit Walden every day, and tell him all the latest news. He even managed to make friends with the great dog Plato, who, ever since Maryllia's accident, had taken up regular hours of vigil outside her bedroom door, regardless of doctor and nurses, though he would move his leonine body gently aside whenever they passed in or out, showing a perfectly intelligent comprehension of their business. Plato every now and again would indulge in a walk abroad with Julian, accompanying him as far as the rectory, where he would enter, laying his broad head on Walden's knee with a world of sympathy in his loving brown eyes, while Nebbie, half-jealous, half-gratified, squatted humbly in the shadow of his feathery tail. And John found a certain melancholy pleasure in caressing the very dog Maryllia loved, and would sit, thoughtfully stroking the animal's thick coat, while Adderley and Dr. Forsyth, both of whom were now accustomed to meet in his little study every evening, discussed the pros and cons of what was likely to happen when Maryllia woke from her long trance of insensibility. Would her awakening be to life or death? John listened to their talk, himself saying nothing, all unaware that they talked merely to cheer him, and to try and put the best light they could on the face of affairs in order to give him the utmost hope.

The weary days rolled on in rain and gloom,—Christmas came and went with a weight and dullness never before known in St. Rest. Every Sunday since the accident, Walden had earnestly requested the prayers of his congregation for Miss Vancourt, 'who was seriously ill'—and on Christmas Day, he gave out the same request, with a pathetic alteration in the wording, which as he uttered it, caused many people to sob as they listened.

"The prayers of this congregation," he said—"are desired for Maryllia Vancourt, who has been much beloved among you, and whose life is now in imminent peril!"

A chill seemed to strike through the church,—an icy blast far colder than the wintry wind,—the alabaster sarcophagus in

front of the altar seemed all at once invested with a terrible significance,—death, and death only was the sovereign ruler of the world! And when the children's choir rose to give the 'Hark the herald angels sing, Glory to the new-born King'—their voices were unsteady and fell out of tune into tears.

Maryllia was indeed in 'imminent peril.' She had become suddenly restless, and her suffering had proportionately increased. At the earliest symptom of returning consciousness, the attention of the watchers at her bedside became redoubled;—should she speak, they were anxious to hear the first word that escaped her lips. For as yet, no one knew how she had come by her accident. None of the hunters had seen her fall, and Bennett the groom, stoutly refused to believe that the mare had either missed her jump, or thrown her mistress.

"She couldn't have done it,"—he declared—"And if she could, she wouldn't! She's too sensible, and Miss Vancourt's too sure a rider. Something's at the bottom of it all, and I'd give a good deal to find out what it is, and *who* it is!"

Thus Bennett, with many dark nods of meaning, and gradually the idea that Maryllia had been the victim of foul play, took root in the minds of all the villagers who heard him. Everyone in the place was on the watch for a clue,—a whisper,—a stray suggestion as to the possible cause of the mischief. But so far nothing had been discovered.

On the night before the last of the year, Maryllia, who had been tossing uneasily all the afternoon, and moaning piteously, suddenly opened her eyes and looked about her with a frightened air of recognition. Cicely, always at hand with the nurse in attendance, went quickly to the bedside in a tremor of hope and fear.

"Maryllia! Dearest, do you know me?"

She stared vaguely, and a faint smile hovered about her lips. Then her brows suddenly knitted into a perplexed, pained frown, and she said quite clearly,—

"It was Oliver Leach!"

Cicely gave a little cry. The nurse warned her into silence by a gesture. There was a pause. Maryllia looked from one to the other wistfully.

"It was not Cleo's fault,"—she went on, speaking slowly, but distinctly—"Cleo never missed. Oliver Leach took the hedge just behind us. It was wrong! He meant to kill me. I saw it in his face!" She shuddered violently, and her eyelids closed. "He was cruel—cruel!" she murmured feebly—"But I was too happy!"

She drifted again into a stupor,—and Cicely, her whole soul awakened by these broken words into a white heat of wrath and desire for vengeance, left the room with sufficient information to set the whole village in an uproar. Oliver Leach! In less than four-and-twenty hours, the news was all over the place. The spreading wave of indignation soon rose to an overwhelming high tide, and had Leach shown himself anywhere in or near the village he would have stood an uncommonly good chance of being first horsewhipped, and then 'ducked' in the river by an excited crowd. Oliver Leach! The hated, petty upstart who had ground down the Abbot's Manor tenantry to the very last penny that could be wrested from them!—who had destroyed old cherished land-marks, and made ugly havoc in many once fair woodland places in order to put money in his own pocket,—even he, so long an object of aversion among them, was the would-be murderer of the last descendant of the Vancourts! The villagers talked of nothing else,—quiet and God-fearing rustics as they were, they had no patience with treachery, meanness and cowardice, and were the last kind of people in the world to hold their peace on a matter of wickedness or injustice, merely because Leach was in the employ of several neighbouring land-owners, including Sir Morton Pippitt. Murmurs and threats ran from mouth to mouth, and Walden when he heard of it, said nothing for, or against, their clamour for revenge. The rage and sorrow of his own soul were greater than the wrath of combined hundreds,—and his feeling was all the more deep and terrible because it found no expression in words. The knowledge

that such a low and vile creature as Oliver Leach had been the cause,—and possibly the intentional cause,—of Maryllia's grievous suffering and injury, moved him to realise for the first time in his life what it was to be conscious of a criminal impulse. He himself longed to kill the wretch who had brought such destruction on a woman's beauty and happiness!—and it was with a curious sort of satisfaction that he found himself called upon in the ordinary course of things to read at evening service during the first week in January, the Twenty-eighth Psalm, wherein David beseeches God to punish the ungodly.

"Reward them according to their deeds, and according to the wickedness of their own inventions!

"Recompense them after the work of their hands: pay them that they have deserved!"

Such demands for the punishment of one's enemies may not be 'Christian,' but they are Scriptural, and as such, John felt himself justified in pronouncing them with peculiar emphasis and fervour.

Meanwhile, by slow degrees, the 'imminent peril' passed, and Maryllia came back to her conscious self,—a self that was tortured in every nerve by pain,—but, with the return of her senses came also her natural sweetness and gentleness, which now took the form of a touching patience, very sad, yet very beautiful to see. The first little gleam of gladness in her eyes awoke for Cicely,—to whom, as soon as she recognised her, she put up her lips to be kissed. Her accident had not disfigured her,—the fair face had been spared, though it was white and drawn with anguish. But she could not move her limbs,—and when she had proved this for herself, she lay very still, thinking quietly, with a dream-like wonder and sorrow in her blue eyes, like the wistfulness in the eyes of a wounded animal that knows not why it should be made to suffer. Docile to her nurses, and grateful for every little service, she remained for some days in a sort of waking reverie, holding Cicely's hand often, and asking her an occasional question about the house, the gardens and the village. And January

was nearly at an end, when she began at last to talk connectedly and to enquire closely as to her own actual condition.

"Am I going to die, Cicely?" she asked, one morning—"You will tell me the truth, dear, won't you? I would rather know."

Cicely choked back her tears, and smiled bravely.

"No, darling, no! You are better,—but——but you will be a long time ill!"

Maryllia looked at her searchingly, and sighed a little.

"What have they done with Cleo?" she murmured.

"Cleo is all right,"—said Cicely—"She was badly hurt, but Bennett knows how you love her, and he is doing all he can for her. She will never hunt again, I'm afraid!"

"Nor shall I!" and Maryllia sighed once more, and closed her eyes to hide the tears that welled up in them.

There was a dark presentiment in her mind,—a heavy foreboding to which she would not give utterance before Cicely, lest it should grieve her. But the next day, when Dr. Forsyth paid her his usual visit, and said in his usual cheery way that all was 'going on well'—she startled him by requesting to speak to him alone, without anyone else in the room, not even the attendant nurse.

"It is only a little question I want to ask!" she said, with the faint reflex of her old bright smile on her face—"And I'm sure you'll answer it!"

'Jimmy' Forsyth hesitated. He felt desperately uncomfortable. He instinctively knew what her question would be,—a question to which there was only one miserable answer. But her grave pleading glance was not to be resisted,—so, making the best of a bad business, he cleared the room, shut the door, and remained in earnest conversation with his patient for half-an-hour. And at the end of that time, he went out, with tears in his keen eyes, and a suspicious cough catching his throat, as he strode away from the Manor through the leafless avenues, and heard the branches of the trees rattling like prison chains in an angry winter's wind.

The worst was said,—and when it was once said, it was soon

known. Maryllia was not to die—not yet. Fate had willed it otherwise. But she was to be a cripple for life. That was her doom. Never again would her little feet go tripping through the rose gardens and walks of her beloved home,—never would her dainty form be borne, a weightless burden, by 'Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt' through the flowering woods of spring,—from henceforth she would have to be carried by others up and down, to and fro, a maimed and helpless creature, with all the physical and healthful joys of living cut away from her at one cruel blow! And yet—it was very strange!—she herself was not stricken with any particular horror or despair at her destiny. When, after the doctor had left, Cicely came in, trembling and afraid,—Maryllia smiled at her with quite a sweet placidity.

"I know all about myself now,"—she said, quietly—"I'm sorry in a way,—because I shall be so useless. But—I have escaped Roxmouth for good this time!"

"Oh my darling!" wept Cicely—"Oh my dear, beautiful Maryllia! If it were only me instead of you!"

Maryllia drew the dark head down on the pillow beside her.

"Nonsense! Why should it have been you!" she said, cheerfully—"You will be a delight to the world, with your voice, Cicely,—whereas I am nothing, and never have been anything! I shall not be missed——'

Her voice faltered a moment, as the thought of John Walden suddenly crossed her mind. He would perhaps—only perhaps—miss her! Anon, a braver and purely unselfish emotion moved her soul, and she began to be almost glad that she was, as she said to herself, 'laid aside.'

"For now,"—she mused—"they can say nothing at all about him at *my* expense! Even Roxmouth's tongue must stop calumniating me,—for though many people are very heartless, they do draw the line at slandering a crippled woman! It's all for the best,—I'm sure it's all for the best!"

And a serene contentment took possession of her,—a marvellous peace that brought healing in its train, for with the earliest days of February, when the first snowdrops were beginning to make their white way through the dark earth, she

was able to be moved from her bed, and carried down to the morning-room, where, lying on her couch, near a sparkling fire, with a bunch of early flowering aconites opening their golden eyes in a vase beside her, she looked almost as if she were getting well enough soon to rise and walk again. She was bright and calm, and quickly managed to impart her own brightness and calmness to others. She summoned all the servants of the household to her in turn, and spoke to them so kindly, and thanked them so sweetly for the trouble and care they had taken and were taking on her behalf, that they could scarcely hide their tears. As for poor Mrs. Spruce, who had nervously hesitated to approach her for fear of breaking down in her presence, she no sooner made her appearance than Maryllia stretched out her arms like a child, with a smile on her face.

"Come and kiss me, Spruce!" she said, almost playfully—"and don't cry! I'm not crying for myself, you see, and I don't want anyone else to cry for me. You'll help to make the cripple-time pleasant, won't you?—yes, of course you will!—and I can do the housekeeping just the same as ever—nothing need alter that. Only instead of running about all over the place, and getting in the way, I shall have to keep still,—and you will always know where to find me. That's something of an advantage, Spruce! And you'll talk to me!—oh yes!—trust you for talking, you dear thing!—and I shall know just as much about everybody as I want to,—there Spruce!—you *will* cry!—so run away just now, and come back presently when you feel better—and braver!"

Whereat Mrs. Spruce had kissed her on the cheek at her own request, and had caught her little hand and kissed that, and had then hurried out of the room before her rising sobs could break out, as they did, into rebellious blubbering.

"Which the Lord Almighty's ways are 'ard to bear!" she wailed. "An' that they're past findin' out, no sensible person will contradict, for why Miss Maryllia should be laid on 'er back an' me left to stan' upright is a mystery Gospel itself can't clear! An' if I could onny see Passon Walden, I'd ask 'im

what it all means, for if anybody knows it he will,—but he won't see no one, an' Dr. Forsyth says best not trouble 'im, so there I am, all at sea without a life-belt, which Spruce bein' 'arder of 'earin' than ever, don't understand nohow nor never will. But if there's no way out of all this trouble, the Lord Himself ain't as wise as I took 'im for, for didn't He say to a man what 'ad crutches in the Testymen 'Arise an' walk'?—an' why shouldn't He say 'Arise an' walk' to Miss Maryllia? I do 'ope I'm not sinful, but I'm fair 'mazed when I see the Lord 'oldin' off 'is hand as 'twere, an' not doin' the right thing as 'e should do!"

Thus Mrs. Spruce argued; and it is to be feared that 'not doing the right thing' was rather generally attributed to 'the Lord,' by the good folk of St. Rest at that immediate period. Most of them were thirsting to try a little 'right' on their own account as concerned Oliver Leach. For the whole story was now known,—though had Maryllia not told it quite involuntarily in a state of semi-unconsciousness, she would never have betrayed the identity of her cowardly assailant. But finding that she had, unknowingly to herself, related the incident as it happened, there was nothing to be done on her part, except to entreat that Leach might be allowed to go unpunished. This, however, was a form of ultra-Christianity which did not in any way commend itself to the villagers of St. Rest. They were on the watch for him day and night,—scouts traversed the high-road to Riversford from east to west, from north to south, in the hope of meeting him driving along to the town as usual on his estate agency business, but not a sign of him had been seen since the evening of the fox-hunt, when Maryllia's body had been found in Farmer Thorpe's field. Then, one of Adam Frost's eldest boys had noticed him talking to the Reverend Putwood Leveson at the entrance of the park surrounding Badsworth Hall, but since that time he had not shown himself, and enquiries at his cottage failed to elicit other information than that he was 'not at home.' The people generally suspected him of being 'in hiding,' and they were not far wrong.

One day, soon after her first move from her bedroom to the morning-room, and when she had grown in part accustomed to being carried up and down, Maryllia suddenly expressed a wish to hear the village choir.

"I should like the children to come and sing to me,"—she said to Cicely—"You remember the hymn they sang on that one Sunday I went to church last summer—'The Lord is my Shepherd'? You sang it with them, Cicely,—and it was so very sweet! Couldn't they come up here to the Manor and sing it to me again?"

"Of course they could, if you wish it, darling!" said Cicely, blinking away the tears that were only too ready to fall at every gentle request proffered by her friend—"And I'm sure they will! I'll go now and tell Miss Eden you want them."

"Yes, do!" said Maryllia, eagerly—"And, Cicely,—wait a minute! Have you seen Mr. Walden at all since I've been ill?"

"No,"—replied Cicely, quietly—"He has not been very well himself, so Dr. Forsyth says,—and he has not been about much except to perform service on Sundays, and to visit his sick parishioners——"

"Well, I am a sick parishioner!" said Maryllia—"Why should he leave me out?"

Cicely looked at her very tenderly.

"I don't think he has left you out, darling! I fancy he has thought of you a great deal. He has sent to enquire after you every day."

Maryllia was silent for a minute. Then, with her own quaint little air of authority and decision, she said—

"Well!—I want to see him now! In fact, I must see him,—not only as a friend, but as a clergyman. Because you know I may not live very long——"

"Maryllia!" cried Cicely, passionately—"Don't say that!"

"I won't, if you don't like it!" and Maryllia smiled up at her from her pillows—"But I think I should like to speak to Mr. Walden. So, as you will be passing the rectory on your way to fetch Miss Eden and the children, will you go

in and ask him if he will come up and see me this afternoon?"

"I will!" And Cicely ran out of the room with a sense of sudden, inexplicable excitement which she could scarcely conceal. Quickly putting on her hat and cloak, she almost flew down the Manor avenue, regardless of the fact that it was raining dismally, and only noticing that there was a scent of violets in the air, and one or two glimmerings of yellow crocus peeping like golden spears through the wet mould. Arriving at the rectory, she forgot that she had not seen Walden at all since Maryllia's accident, and scarcely waiting for the maid Hester to announce her, she hastened into his study with startling suddenness. Springing from his chair, he confronted her with wild imploring eyes, and a face from which every vestige of colour had fled.

"What is it?" he muttered, faintly—"My God spare me!—she—she is not dead?"

"No, no!" cried Cicely, smitten to the heart with self-reproach at her own unthinking impetuosity—"No—no—*no*! Oh what an utter idiot I am! Oh, Mr. Walden, I didn't think—I didn't know—oh, dear Mr. Walden, I'm so sorry I have alarmed you—do, do forgive me!——" And she began to cry bitterly.

He looked at her vaguely for a moment,—anon his face relaxed, and his eyes softened. Advancing to her, he took both her hands and pressed them.

"Poor little Cicely!" he said, kindly—"So it is you, is it? Poor dear little singer!—you have had so much anxiety —and I——" He broke off and turned his head away. Then, after a pause, he resumed——"It's all right, Cicely! You—you startled me just a little—I scarcely knew you! You look so worn out, dear child, and no wonder! What can I do to cheer you? Is she—is she still going on well?"

Cicely raised her dark, tear-wet eyes to his in a kind of wistful wonder. Then she suddenly stooped and kissed the hands that held her own.

"Homage to a brave man!" she said, impulsively—"You

are brave!—don't contradict me, because I won't stand it!" She detached her hands from his and tried to laugh. "Is she going on well, you ask? Yes,—as well as she can. But—you know she will be a cripple—always?"

Walden bent his head sadly.

"I know!"

"And it's all through those terrible 'Five Sister beeches!" she went on—"If Oliver Leach had been allowed to cut them down, Maryllia would never have gone out to save them that morning, or given the wretched man his dismissal. And he wouldn't have cursed her, or tried to murder her!"

Walden shuddered a little.

"Then it is quite as much my fault as anybody else's, Cicely,"—he said, wearily—"For I had something to do with the saving of the old trees. At any rate, I did not exercise my authority as I might have done to pacify the villagers, when their destruction was threatened. I feel somehow that I have my share of blame in the disaster."

"Nonsense!" snapped out Cicely, sharply, almost angrily—"Why should you take the sins of everyone in the parish on your shoulders? Broad as they are, you can draw the line somewhere surely! You might as well blame poor old Josey Letherbarrow! He was the one who persuaded Maryllia to save the Five Sisters,—and if you were to tell him that all the trouble had come through him, he'd die! Poor old dear!" She laughed a trifle hysterically. "It's nobody's fault, I suppose. It's destiny!"

John sighed heavily.

"Of course," went on Cicely desperately—"Maryllia may live a long time,—or she may not. She thinks not. And because she thinks not, she wants to see you."

He started nervously.

"To see *me*?"

"Yes. It's perfectly natural, isn't it? Isn't it your business to visit the sick,—and——" He interrupted her by a quick gesture.

"Not dying,"—he said—"I will not have the word used! She is not dying—she will not die! She shall not!"

His eyes flashed—he looked all at once like an inspired apostle with the gift of life in his hand. Cicely watched him with a sudden sense of awe.

"If you say so,"—she faltered slowly—"perhaps she will not. Go and see her!"

"To-day?"

"Yes,—this afternoon. She has asked for the school children to come and sing to her,—I shall try to get them about four. If you come at five, she will be able to see you, —alone."

A silence fell between them.

"I will come!" said John, at last.

"That's right! Good-bye till then!"

And with a glance more expressive than words, Cicely went.

Left to himself, John threw open his study windows, and stepping out into his garden all wet with rain, made his way to its warmest corner, where, notwithstanding inclement weather, the loveliest sweet violets were thickly blossoming under his glass frames. He began to gather them carefully, and massed them together in bunches of deep purple and creamy white,—while Bainton, working at a little distance off, looked up in surprise and gratification at the sight of him. For it was many weary weeks since 'Passon' had taken any interest in his 'forced blooms.' Nebbie, having got thoroughly draggled and muddy by jumping wildly after his master through an exceedingly wet tangle of ivy, sat demurely watching him, as the little heap of delicately scented blossoms increased.

"The violets are doing wonderfully well this year, Bainton," he presently said, with his old kind smile, addressing his gardener — "I am taking these to Miss Vancourt this afternoon."

Bainton lifted his cap respectfully.

"God bless her!" he said,——"An' you too, Passon!"

And John, holding the fragrant bunch of small sweet flowers tenderly in his hand, answered gently—

"Thank you, my friend! I hope He will!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE rain cleared off in the afternoon and a bright glint of sunshine shone through the slowly dispersing clouds. enabling the children of the village choir to put on their best frocks and hats for the important function to which Cicely had summoned them. There was great excitement among these little people. That they should be specially asked to sing to Miss Vancourt was to them an unexpected and unprecedented honour, and filled them with speechless delight and pride. They were all very shy and nervous, however, and it was with quite a trembling awe that they scraped their feet on the polished oak floors of the Manor, and dragged them hesitatingly and timidly along into the morning-room where Maryllia lay peacefully resting, and awaiting their approach. Her nurses had attired her freshly and becomingly, and had wrapped her in soft pale rose cashmere with delicate ribbons of the same hue tying it about her, while her lovely hair, loosely knotted on the top of her head, was caught together by a comb edged with pink coral which gave just a contrasting touch of colour to the gold-brown curls. She turned a smiling happy face on the children as they entered, and to Miss Eden and her young assistant, Susie Prescott, she held out her hand.

"It is so good of you to humour me in my fancy!" she said; "I loved the little hymn you all sang on the Sunday I came to church with my friends—don't you remember?—and I want to hear it again. I came in late to service that day, didn't I?—yes!—it was so wrong of me! But I should never do it again if I had the chance. Unfortunately we are

always sorry for our wrong-doings too late!" She smiled again, and in answer to murmured words of sympathy from Miss Eden, and the sight of tears in the eyes of Susie Prescott, made haste to say—"Oh no!—I'm not in any pain just now. You need not think that! I am just helpless—that's all. But I've got all my reasoning faculties back, thank God!—and my sight has been spared. I can read and write, and enjoy music,—so you see how many blessings are still left to me! Will you ask the children to begin now, please? There is not a piano in this room,—but Cicely will play the accompaniment on the old spinet—it's quite in tune. And she will sing with you."

In another moment they were all grouped round the ancient instrument of Charles the Second's day, and Cicely, keeping her hands well pressed on the jingling ivory keys, managed to evoke from them something like a faint, far-off organ-like sound. Falteringly at first, and then more clearly and steadily, as Cicely's full round voice assisted them, the children sang—

"The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want,
He maketh me down to lie,
In pleasant fields where the lilies grow,
And the river runneth by."

Maryllia listened, watching them. The declining sunlight, pale as it was, shed luminance upon the awkward stumpy boys and bashfully shrinking girls, as with round, affectionate eyes fixed upon her, they went on tunefully—

"The Lord is my Shepherd; He feedeth me
In the depth of a desert land;
And, lest I should in the darkness slip,
He holdeth me by the hand.

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want,
My mind on Him is stayed,
And though through the Valley of Death I walk,
I shall not be afraid!"

Here, something like a sob interrupted the melody. Some one in the little choir broke down,—but Cicely covered the break with a tender chord, and the young voices rose above it.

"The Lord is my Shepherd; O Shepherd sweet,
Leave me not here to stray;
But guide me safe to Thy heavenly fold,
And keep me there, I pray!"

With each verse, the harmony grew sweeter and more solemn, till Maryllia, lying back on her pillows with closed eyes through which the tears would creep despite herself, began to feel earth very far away and heaven very near. At the 'Amen,' she said:

"Thank you! That was beautiful! Do you mind singing the third verse over again?"

They obeyed, looking at Cicely for the lead.

"The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want,
My mind on Him is stayed,
And though through the Valley of Death I walk,
I shall not be afraid!"

There was a silence.

"Now," breathed Cicely softly—"now the Amen!"

Full and grave came the solemn chord and the young fresh voices with it,—

"A—men!"

And then Cicely went up to Maryllia and bent over her.

"Are you pleased, dearest?"

She was very quiet. There were tears in her eyes, but at the question, she smiled.

"Very pleased! And very happy! Take the children away now and give them tea. And thank them all for me,—say I will see them again some day when I am stronger—when I do not feel inclined to cry quite so easily!"

In a few minutes all the little scuffling shuffling feet had made their way out of the room, and Maryllia was left to herself in the deepening twilight,—a twilight illumined brightly every now and again by the leaping flame of a sparkling log

fire. Suddenly the door which had just been closed after the children, gently opened again, and Cicely entering, said in rather a tremulous voice—

"Mr. Walden is here, Maryllia."

Whereat she quickly disappeared.

Maryllia turned her head round on her pillows and watched John's tall straight figure slowly approaching. A delicate, Spring-like odour floated to her as he came, and she saw that he carried a bunch of violets. Then she held out her hand.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Walden!"

He tried to speak, but could not. Without a word he laid the violets gently down on the silk coverlet of her couch. She took them up at once and kissed them.

"How sweet they are!" she murmured—"The first I have had given to me this year!"

She smiled up at him gratefully, and pointed to a chair close beside her.

"Will you sit near me?" she said—"And then we can talk!"

Silently he obeyed. To see her lying there so quietly resigned and helpless, nearly unmanned him, but he did brave battle with his own emotions. He took her little offered hand and gently kissed it. If to touch its soft smooth whiteness sent fire through his veins, there was no sign of feeling in his face. He was grave and strangely impassive.

"I am very grieved to see you like this——" he began.

"Yes, I am sure you are!" she quickly interrupted him—"But please do not talk about it just now! I want to forget my poor crippled body altogether for a little while. I've had so much bother with it lately! I want to talk to you about my soul. That's not crippled! And you can tell me just what it is and what I am to do with it."

He gazed at her in a kind of bewildered wonder.

"Your soul!"—he murmured.

"Yes." And a shadow of sad and wistful thought darkened her features—"You see I may not live very long,—and I ought to be properly prepared in case I die. I know you will explain everything that is difficult to me,—because you seem to be

sure of your faith. You remember your sermon on the soul, when I came to church just that once?"

He bent his head. He could find no words with which to interrupt her.

"Well, I have often thought of it since,—and I have longed —oh, so much!—to make a confession to you! But may I ask you one or two questions first?"

His dry lips moved—and he whispered, rather than spoke—

"You may! But are you not distressing yourself about matters which——which perhaps—could wait——?"

Her blue eyes regarded him with a wonderful courage.

"Dear Mr. Walden, I don't think I ought to wait,"—she said, very earnestly—"Because really no one has ever done anything for me in a religious sense,—and if I *am* to die, you are the only person in the world who can help me!"

He tried to rouse his wandering, ebbing energies.

"I will do my best,"—he said, slowly—"My best, I mean, to answer your questions."

"You will?—As a clergyman, as a friend and an honest man?—yes, I felt sure you would!" And she spoke with almost passionate eagerness—"I will put you through your catechism, and you shall if you like, put me through mine! Now to begin with,—though it seems a strange thing to ask a clergyman—do you really believe in God?"

He started,—wakened from his trance of mind by sheer amazement.

"Do I really believe in God? With all my soul, with all my heart, I believe in Him!"

"Many clergymen don't,"—said Maryllia, gravely studying his face,—"That is why I asked. You mustn't mind! You see I have met a great many Churchmen who preach what they do not practise, and it has rather worried me. Because, of course, if they really believed in God they would be careful not to do things which their faith forbids them to do."

He was silent.

"My next question is just as audacious as my first,"—she went on after a pause—"It is this—do you believe in Christ?"

He rose from his chair and stood tenderly looking down upon her. His old authoritative energy inspired him,—he had now recovered himself sufficiently to be able to trample down his own clamorous personal emotions for the time and to think only of his spiritual duty.

"I believe in Him as the one Divine Man ever born!" he said.

"Is that quite sufficient for orthodoxy?" And she looked up at him with a half smile.

"Perhaps not! But I fear orthodoxy and I are scarcely the best of friends!" he replied—"Must I really tell you my own private form of belief?"

"Ah yes!—please do so!" she answered gently—"It will help me so much!"

He paused a moment. Then he said—

"I believe this;—that Christ was born into the world as a Sign and Symbol of the life, death and destined immortality of each individual human soul. Into the mystery of His birth I do not presume to penetrate. But I see Him as He lived,—the embodiment of Truth—crucified! I see Him dead,—rising from the grave to take upon Himself eternal life. I accept Him as the true manifestation of the possible Divine in Man—for no man before or after Him has had such influence upon the human race. And I am convinced that the faithful following of His Gospel ensures peace in this world, and joy in the world to come!"

He paused, and drew nearer to her. "Will that suffice you?"

Her eyes were turned away from his, but he could see a sparkle as of dew on her lashes.

"Sit down by me again,"—she said in a low uncertain voice—"You do believe!—and now that I know this for certain, I can make my confession to you."

He resumed his seat beside her couch.

"Surely you have nothing to confess——" he said, gently.

"Why yes, I have!" she declared—"I've not been good, you know!"

He smiled.

"Have you not?" But his voice trembled a little—"Well! I suppose I must believe you—but it will be difficult!"

She looked down at the bunch of violets she held, and touched the purple and white blossoms tenderly.

"I don't mean,"—she continued softly—"that I have been downright wicked in a criminal sense. Oh no!—I haven't anything to confess that way! What I mean is that I haven't been religious. Now please let me go straight on and explain—will you?"

He made a slight gesture of assent.

"Well now, to begin with," she said—"of course when I was quite a child, I was taught to say prayers, and I was taken to church on Sundays just in the usual way. But I never could quite believe there was anyone to listen to my prayers, and going to church bored me and made me dreadfully sleepy. All the clergymen seemed to talk and preach in exactly the same way, and they all spoke in the same sing-song voice. I found it very dull and monotonous. I was told that God lived up in the sky, and that He loved me very much and would take care of me always,—but I never could make out why, if God loved me, He should not tell me so Himself, without the help of a clergyman. Because then I should have understood things better. I daresay it was a very wicked idea,—but it used to come into my head like that, and I couldn't help it. Then, everything in my life as a child came to an end with a great crash as it were, when my father was killed. I adored my father! He was always kind to me,—always tender!—he was the only man in the world that ever loved me! And when he was taken away suddenly from me like that, and I was told it was God's will, I hated God! I did really! You know unless you are a born angel, it is natural to hate anyone who takes away the dearest and most beloved thing you have to live for, isn't it?"

John turned his head a little away, and looked straight before him into the glowing embers of the fire. A deep sigh involuntarily escaped him.

"I suppose it is natural!" he said, slowly—"But we must fight against nature. We must believe that God knows best!"

Her eyes, blue as flax-flowers, turned towards him wistfully.

"You believe that?" she asked—"You are sure that God means everything for the best, even when He makes you suffer for no fault of your own?"

At this his heart was sorely troubled within him, but he answered quietly and firmly—

"Yes! I am sure that God means everything for the best, even when He makes me suffer for no fault of my own!"

His voice, always soft and mellow, dropped to a tenderer cadence, as,—like a true servant of the Master he served,—he faithfully asserted his belief, that even in personal sorrow, the Divine will is always a Divine blessing.

A pause of silence ensued. Then Maryllia went on somewhat hesitatingly—

"Well, I was wicked, you see! I could *not* believe that God meant it for the best in killing my father! And I know that my father himself never could understand that God was at all good in allowing my mother to die when I was born. So that I was quite set against God, when, after my father's death, Uncle Fred and his wife came and took me away to live with them, and adopted me as their daughter. And living with them, and being always surrounded by the society they entertained, made me forget religion altogether. They never went to church,—neither did any of the people they called their friends. Indeed nobody I ever met in all the 'sets' of London, or Paris, or New York ever seemed to think of God or a future life at all. Some of them went in for what they called 'spiritualism' and deceived each other in the most terrible way! I never heard people tell so many dreadful lies! They used to joke about it afterwards. But no one ever seemed to think that religion,—real religion—real Christianity—was at all necessary or worth talking about. They called it an 'exploded myth.' When I met Cicely Bourne I found that *she* believed in it. And I was quite surprised! Because she had such a hard life, and she had always been so cruelly

treated, that I wondered how she could believe in anything. But she told me that when she knew she had a voice and a gift for music, she used to pray that an angel might be sent to help her,—and when I asked her—'Did the angel come?' she said that God had sent *me* as the angel! Of course it wasn't true, but it was very sweet of her to say it!"

She paused. Walden was quite silent. Leaning his elbow on the raised head of her couch, he shaded his brow with one hand, thus partially covering his eyes from the glow of the fire. There were tears in those eyes, and he was afraid she would see them.

"Cicely was always so brave and contented,"—she presently continued—"And when I learned to know more of her I began to wonder if really after all, her religion helped her? And then there came a time of great worry and trouble for me—and—I came home here to try and find peace and rest—and I met *you!*"

He moved restlessly, but said nothing.

"To meet you was an event in my life!" she said, turning towards him a little, and laying her hand timidly on his coat sleeve—"It was really!"

He looked at her,—and a wave of warmth passed over his face.

"Was it?" he murmured.

"Of course it was!" she declared,—and almost she laughed; "You won't understand me, I daresay!—But to meet you for the first time *is* a kind of event to most people! They begin to think about you,—they can't help it! You are so different from the ordinary sort of clergyman,—I don't know how or why,—but you are!"

He smiled a trifle sadly.

"Talk of yourself, not of me;"—he said, uneasily.

"Yes, but I cannot very well talk of myself now without bringing you into it,"—she insisted,—"And you must let me tell my story in my own way!"

He shaded his eyes again from the firelight, and listened.

"After I met you that morning," she went on—"I heard

many things about you in the village. Everyone seemed to love you!—yes, even the tiniest children! The poor people, the old and the sick, all seemed to trust you as their truest and best friend! And when I knew all this I began to think very earnestly about the religious faith which seemed to make you what you are. I didn't go to church to hear you preach—you know that!—I only went once—and I was late—you remember? So it has not been anything you have said in the pulpit that has changed me so much. It is just *you*, yourself! It is because you live your life as you do, that I want to learn to live the rest of mine just a little bit like it, even though I am crippled and more or less useless. You will teach me, won't you? I want to have your faith—your goodness——"

He interrupted her.

"Do not call me good!" he said, faintly—"I cannot bear it I cannot!"

She looked at him, and there were tears in her eyes.

"I'm afraid you will have to bear it!" she said, softly—"For you *are* good!—you have always been good to *me*! And I do honestly believe that God means everything for the best as you say, because now I am a cripple, I have escaped once and for all from the marriage my aunt was trying to force me into with Lord Roxmouth. I thank God every minute of my life for that!"

"You never loved him?"

John's voice was very low and tremulous as he asked this question.

"Never!" she answered, in the same low tone. "How could you think it?"

"I did not know—I was not quite sure——" he murmured.

"No, I never loved him!" she said, earnestly—"I always feared and hated him! And he did not love me,—he only cared for the money my aunt would have left me had I married him. But I have always wanted to be loved for myself—and this has been my great trouble. If anyone had ever really cared for me, I think it would have made me good and wise, and full of trust in God—I should have been a

much better woman than I am—I am sure I should! People say that the love I want is only found in poems and story books, and that my fancies are quite ridiculous. Perhaps they are. But I can't help it. I am just myself and no other!" She smiled a little—then went on—"Lord Roxmouth has a great social position,—but, to my mind, he has degraded it. I could never have married a man for whom I had no respect. You see I can talk quite easily about all this because it is past. For of course now I am a cripple, the very idea of marriage for me is all over. And I am really very glad it is so. No one can spread calumnies about me, or compromise my name any more. And even the harm Lord Roxmouth meant to try and do to *you*, has been stopped. So this time God *has* answered my prayers!"

John looked up suddenly.

"Did you pray——?" he began in a choked voice—then checked himself, and said quickly—"Dear child, I do not think Lord Roxmouth could have ever done me any harm!"

"Ah, you don't know him as I do!" and she sighed—"He stops at nothing. He will employ any base tool, any mean spy, to gain his own immediate purposes. And—and—" she hesitated—"you know I wrote to you about it——he saw us in the picture-gallery——"

"Well!" said John, and his eyes kindled into a sudden light and fire—"What if he did?"

"You were telling me how much you disliked seeing women smoke"—she faltered—"And—and—you spoke of Psyche,—you remember——"

"I remember!" And John grew bolder and more resolute in spirit as he saw the soft rose flush on her cheeks and listened to the dulcet tremor of her voice—"I shall never forget!"

"And he thought——he thought——" here her words sank almost to a whisper——"that I——that you——"

He turned suddenly and looked down upon her where she lay. Their eyes met,—and in that one glance, love flashed a whole unwritten history. Stooping over her, he caught

her little hands in his own, and pressed them against his heart with strong and passionate tenderness.

"If he thought I loved you,"—he said—"he was right! I loved you then—I love you now! I shall love you for ever—till death, and beyond it! My darling, my darling! You know I love you!"

A half sob, a little smile answered him,—and then soft, broken words.

"Yes—I know! I always knew!"

He folded his arms about her, and drew her into an embrace from which he wildly thought not Death itself should tear her.

"And you care?" he whispered.

"I care so much that I care for nothing else!" she said—then, all suddenly she broke down and began to weep pitifully, clinging to him and murmuring the grief she had till now so bravely restrained—"But it is all too late!" she sobbed—"Oh my dearest, you love me,—and I love you,—ah!—you will never know how much!—but it is too late!—I can be of no use to you!—I can never be of use! I shall only be a trouble to you,—a drag and a burden on your days!—oh John!—and a little while ago I might have been your joy instead of your sorrow!"

He held her to him more closely.

"Hush, hush!" he said softly, soothing her as he would have soothed a child,—and with mingled tenderness and reverence, he kissed the sweet trembling lips, the wet eyes, the tear-stained cheeks—"Hush, my little girl! You are all my joy in this world—can you not feel that you are?" And he kissed her again and yet again. "And I am so unworthy of you!—so old and worn and altogether unpleasing to a woman! I am nothing! Yet you love me! How strange that seems!—how wonderful!—for I have done nothing to deserve your love! And had you been spared your health and strength, I should never have spoken—never! I would not have clouded your sunny life with my selfish shadow! No! I should have let you go on your way and have kept silence

to the end! For in all your vital brightness and beauty I should never have dared to say I love you, Maryllia!"

At this she checked her sobs, and looked up at him in vague amazement.

"You would never have spoken?"

"Never!"

"You would have let me live on here, quite close to you, seeing you every day perhaps, without a word of the love in your heart?"

He kissed her, half-smiling.

"I think I should!"

"Then"—said Maryllia, with grave sweetness—"I know that God does mean everything for the best—and I thank Him for having made me a cripple! Because if my trouble has warmed your heart,—your cold, cold heart, John!"—and she smiled at him through her tears—"and has made you say you love me, then it is the most blessed and beautiful trouble I could possibly have, and has brought me the greatest happiness of my life! I am glad of it and proud of it,—I glory in it! For I would rather know that you love me than be the straightest, brightest, loveliest woman in the world! I would rather be here in your arms—so—" and she nestled close against him—"than have all the riches that were ever counted!—and—listen, John!" Here, with her clinging caressing arms, she drew his head down close to her breast—"Even if I have to die and leave you soon, I shall know that all is right with my soul!—yes, dear, dear John!—because you will have taken away all its faults and made it beautiful with your love!—and God will love it for love's sake, almost as much as He must love you for your own, John!"

There was only one way—there never has been more than one way—to answer such tender words, and John took that way by silencing the sweet lips that spoke them with a kiss in which the pent-up passion of his soul was concentrated. The shadows of the winter gloaming deepened;—the firelight died down to a mass of rosy embers;—and when Cicely softly opened the door an hour later, the room was almost dark.

But the scent of violets was in the air—she heard soft whisperings, and saw that two human beings at least, out of all a seeking world, had found the secret of happiness. And she stole away unseen,—smiling, yet with glad tears in her eyes,—and a little unuttered song in her heart—

"If to love is the best of all things known,
We have gain'd the best in the world, mine own!
We have touch'd the summit of love—and live,—
And God Himself has no more to give!"

CHAPTER XXXII

THE prime of youth is said to be the only time of life when lovers are supposed by poets and romancists to walk 'on air,' so as John Walden was long past the age when men are called young, it is difficult to determine the kind of buoyant element on which he trod when he left the Manor that evening. Youth!—what were its vague inchoate emotions, its trembling hesitations, its more or less selfish jealousies, doubts and desires, compared with the strong, glowing and tender passion which filled the heart of this man, so long a solitary in the world, who now awaking to the consciousness of love in its noblest, purest form, knew that from henceforth he was no longer alone! A life,—delicate and half broken by cruel destiny, hung on his for support, help and courage,—a soul, full of sweetness and purity, clung to him for its hope of Heaven! The glad blood quickened in his veins,—he was twice a man,—never had he felt so proud, so powerful, and withal so young. Like the Psalmist he could have said 'My days are renewed upon the earth!'—and he devoutly thanked God for the blessing and glory of the gift of love which above all others makes existence sweet.

"My darling!" he murmured, as he walked joyously along the little distance stretching between the lodge gates of the Manor and his own home—"She shall never miss one joy that I can give her! How fortunate it is that I am tall and strong, for when the summer days come I can lift her from her couch and carry her out into the garden like a little child in my arms, and she will rest under the trees,

and perhaps gradually get accustomed to the loss of her own bright vitality if I do my utmost best to be all life to her! I will fill her days with varied occupations and try to make the time pass sweetly,—she shall keep all her interests in the village—nothing shall be done without her consent—ah yes!—I know I shall be able to make her happier than she would be if left to bear her trouble quite alone! If she were strong and well, I should be no fit partner for her—but as it is—perhaps my love may comfort her, and my unworthiness be forgiven!"

Thus thinking, he arrived at his rectory, and entering, pushed open the door of his study. There, somewhat to his surprise, he found Dr. 'Jimmy' Forsyth standing in a meditative attitude with his back to the fire.

"Hullo, Walden!" he said—"Here you are at last! I've been waiting for you ever so long!"

"Have you?" and John, smiling radiantly, threw off his hat, and pushed back his grey-brown curls from his forehead—"I'm sorry! Anything wrong?"

Dr. 'Jimmy' shrugged his shoulders.

"Nothing particular. Oliver Leach is dead,—that's all!"

Walden started back. The smile passed from his face, for, remembering the scarcely veiled threats of his parishioners, he began to fear lest they should have taken some unlawful vengeance on the object of their hatred.

"Dead!" he echoed amazedly—"Surely no one—no one has killed him?"

"Not a bit of it!" said Forsyth, complacently—"It just happened!"

"How?"

"Well, it appears that the rascal has been lying low for a considerable time in the house of our reverend friend, Putwood Leveson. That noble soul has been playing 'sanctuary' to him, and no doubt warned him of the very warm feeling with which the villagers of St. Rest regarded him. He has been maturing certain plans, and waiting till an opportunity should arise for him to get away to Riversford,

where apparently he intended to take up his future abode, Mordaunt Appleby the brewer having offered him a situation as brewery accountant. The opportunity occurred last night, so I hear. He managed to get off with his luggage in a trap, and duly arrived at the Crown Inn. There he was set upon in the taproom by certain old friends and gambling associates, who accused him of wilfully attempting to injure Miss Vancourt. He denied it. Thereupon they challenged him to drink ten glasses of raw whiskey, one on top of another to prove his innocence. It was a base and brutal business, but he accepted the challenge. At the eighth glass he fell down unconscious. His companions thought he was merely drunk—but—as it turned out—he was dead."

Walden heard in silence.

"It's horrible!" he said at last—"Yet—I cannot say I'm sorry! I suppose as a Christian minister I ought to be,—but I'm not! I only hope none of my people were concerned in the matter?"

"You may be quite easy on that score,"—replied Forsyth—"Of course there will be an inquest, and a severe reproof will be administered to the men who challenged him,—but there the affair will end. I really don't think we need grieve ourselves unduly over the exit of one scoundrel from a world already overburdened with his species." With that, he turned and poked the fire into a brighter blaze. "Let us talk of something else"—he said. "I called in to tell you that Santori is in London, and that I have taken the responsibility upon myself of sending for him to see Miss Vancourt."

Walden was instantly all earnest attention.

"Who is Santori?" he asked.

"Santori," replied Forsyth, "is a great Italian, whose scientific researches into medicine and surgery have won him the honour of all nations, save and except the British. We are very insular, my dear Walden!—we never will tolerate the 'furriner' even if he brings us health and healing in his hand! Santori is a medical 'furriner,' therefore he is generally despised by the English medical profession. But I'm a Scotsman—I've no

prejudices except my own!" And he laughed—"And I acknowledge Santori as one of the greatest men of the age. He is a scientist as well as a surgeon—and his great 'speciality' is the spine and nerves. Now I have never quite explained to you the nature of Miss Vancourt's injuries, and there is no need even now to particularise them. The main point of her case is that in her present condition, she must remain a cripple for life,—and—" here he hesitated,—"that life cannot, I fear, be a very long one."

Walden turned his head away for a moment.

"Go on!" he said huskily.

"At the same time," continued Dr. Forsyth, gently—"there are no bones broken,—all the mischief is centred in damage to the spine. I sent, as you know, for Wentworth Glynn, our best specialist in this country, and he assured me there was no hope whatever of any change for the better. Yesterday, I happened to see in the papers that Santori had arrived in London for a few weeks, and, acting on a sudden inspiration, I wrote him a letter at once, explaining the whole case, and asking him to meet me in consultation. He has wired an answer to-day, saying he will be here to-morrow."

Walden's eyes were full of sorrowful pain and yearning.

"Well!" he said, with a slight sigh—"And what then?"

"What then?" responded Dr. 'Jimmy' cheerfully—"Why nothing,—except that it will be more satisfactory to everyone concerned,—and to me particularly—to have his opinion."

There was a pause. John gazed down into the fire as though he saw a whole world of mingled grief and joy reflected in its crimson glow. Then, suddenly lifting his head, he looked his friend full in the face.

"Forsyth,"—he said—"I think I ought to tell you—you ought to know——I am going to marry her!"

Without a word, 'Jimmy' gripped his hand and pressed it hard. Then he turned very abruptly, and walked up and down the little room. And presently he drew out his glasses and polished them vigorously, though they were in no need of this process.

"I thought you would!" he said, after a while—"Of course I saw how the land lay! I knew you loved her——"

"I suppose that was easy to guess!" said John, a warm flush of colour rising to his brows as he spoke—"But you could not have imagined for a moment that she would love me! Yet she does! That is the wonder of it! I am such an old humdrum fellow—and she is so young and bright and pretty! It seems so strange that she should care!"

Dr. Forsyth looked at him with an appreciative twinkle in his eye. Then he laid a friendly hand upon his shoulder.

"You are a quaint creature, John!" he said—"Yet, do you know, I rather like your humdrum ways? I do, positively! And if I were a woman, I think I should esteem myself fortunate if I got you for a husband! I really should! You certainly don't suffer from swelled head, John!—that's a great point in your favour!"

He laughed,—and John laughed with him. Then, drawing their chairs to opposite sides of the fire, they talked for an hour or more on the subject that was most interesting to them both. John was for marrying Maryllia as soon as possible—"in order that I may have the right to watch over her," he urged, and Forsyth agreed.

"But wait till Santori has seen her, and given his opinion," he said—"If he comes, as his telegram says he will, to-morrow, we can take him entirely into our confidence, and decide what is best for her peace and pleasure. The ceremony of marriage can be gone through privately at the Manor,—by the way, why don't you ask your friend the Bishop to officiate? I suppose he knows the position?"

"He knows much, but not all,"—said John—"I wrote to him about the accident of course—and have written to him frequently since, but I did not think I should ever have such news to tell him as I have now!" His eyes darkened with deep feeling. "He has had his own tragedy—he will understand mine!"

A silence fell between them,—and soon after, Forsyth took his leave. Walden, left alone, and deeply conscious of the

new responsibility he had taken upon his life, set to work to get through his parish business for the evening, in order to have time to devote to Maryllia the next day, and, writing a long letter to Bishop Brent, he told him all the history of his late-found happiness,—his hopes, his sorrows, his fears—and his intention to show what a man's true love could be to a woman whom unkind destiny had deprived of all the natural joys of living. He added to this letter a few words referring to Forsyth's information respecting the Italian specialist, Santori, who had been sent for to see Maryllia and pronounce on her condition—"but I fear," he wrote, "that there is nothing to be done, save to resign ourselves to the apparently cruel and incomprehensible will of God, which in this case has declared itself in favour of allowing the innocent to suffer."

Next morning he awoke to find the sun shining brightly from a sky almost clear blue, save for a few scattered grey fleecy clouds,—and, stepping out into his garden, the first thing he noticed was a root of primroses breaking shyly into flower. Seeing Bainton trimming the shrubbery close by, he called his attention to it.

"Spring is evidently on the way, Bainton!" he said cheerily, "We are getting past the white into the gold again!"

"Ay, Passon, that we be!" rejoined Bainton, with a smile—"An' please the Lord, we'll soon get from the gold into the blue, an' from the blue into the rose! For that's allus the way o' the year,—first little white shaky blossoms wot's a bit afraid of theirselves, lest the frost should nip 'em,—and then the deep an' the pale an' the bright gold blossoms, which just laughs at dull weather—an' then the blue o' the forget-me-nots an' wood-bells,—an' the red o' the roses to crown all. An' mebbe," he continued, with a shrewd upward glance at his master's face—"when the roses come, there'll be a bit of orange-blossom to keep 'em company——"

John started,—and then his kind smile, so warm and sunny and sweet, shone like a beam of light itself across his features.

"What, Bainton!" he said—"So you know all about it already!"

Bainton began to chuckle irrepressibly.

"Well, if the village ain't a liar from its one end to its t'otherest, then I knows!" he declared triumphantly—"Lord love ye, Passon, you don't s'pose ye can keep any secrets in this 'ere parish? They knows all about ye 'fore ye knows yerself!—an' Missis Spruce she came down from the Manor last night in such a state o' fluster as never was, an' she sez, all shakin' like an' smilin'—'Miss Maryllia's goin' to be married,' sez she, an' we up an' sez to 'er—'What, is the Dook goin' to 'ave her just the same though she can't walk no more?' an' she sez: 'Dook, not a bit of it! There's a better man than any Dook close by an' it's 'im she's goin' to 'ave an' nobody else, an' it's Passon Walden,' sez she, an' with that we all gives a big shout, an' she busts out cryin' an' laughin' together, an' we all doos the same like the nesh fools we are when a bit o' news pleases us like,—an'—an'——" Here Bainton's voice grew rather husky and tremulous as he proceeded—"so of course the news went right through the village two minutes 'arterwards. An' it's all we could do to keep from comin' up outside 'ere an' givin' ye a rousin' cheer 'fore goin' to bed, onny Mr. Netlips 'e said it wouldn't be 'commensurate' wotever that is, so we just left it. Howsomever, I made up my mind I'd be the first to wish ye joy, Passon!—an' I wish it true!"

Silently Walden held out his hand. Bainton grasped it with affectionate respect in his own horny palm.

"Not that I'd 'ave ever thought you'd a' bin a marryin' man, Passon!" he averred, his shrewd eyes lighting up with the kindliest humour—"But it's never too late to mend!"

Walden laughed.

"That's true, Bainton! It's never too late to repent of one's follies and begin to be wise! Thank you for all your good wishes—they come from the heart, I know! But"—and his smile softened into an earnest gravity of expression—"they must be for her—for Miss Maryllia—not for me! I am already happier than I deserve—but she needs everyone's good thoughts and prayers to help her to bear her enforced helplessness—she is very brave—yet—it is hard——"

He broke off, not trusting himself to say more.

"It's hard—it's powerful hard!" agreed Bainton, sympathetically—"Such a wife as she'd a' made t'ye, Passon, if she'd been as she was when she come in smilin' an' trippin' across this lawn by your side, an' ye broke off a bit o' your best lilac for her! There's the very bush—all leafless twigs now, but strong an' 'elthy an' ready to bloom again! Ah! I remember that day well!—'twas the same day as ye sat under the apple-tree arter she was gone an' fastened a threepenny bit with a 'ole in it to yer watch chain! I seed it! An' I was fair 'mazed over that 'oley bit,—but I found out all about it!—hor-hor-hor!" and Bainton began to laugh with exceeding delight at his own perspicuity—"A few minutes' gossip with old Missis Tapple at the post-office did it!—hor-hor-hor! for she told me, bless 'er heart!—as 'ow Miss Vancourt 'ad given it t'ye for fun, as a sort o' reward like for sendin' off some telegrams for 'er! Hor-hor! There's naught like a village for findin' out everybody's little secrets, an' our village beats every other one I ever heard tell on at that kind o' work, it do reely now! I say, Passon, when they was spreadin' all the stories round about you an' Miss Vancourt, I could a' told a tale about the 'oley bit, couldn't I?"

"You could indeed!" laughed John, good-naturedly—"and yet—I suppose you didn't!"

"Not I!" said Bainton, stoutly—"I do talk a bit, but I ain't Missis Spruce, nor I ain't turned into a telephone tube yet. Mebbe I will when I'm a bit older. Ave ye heard, Passon, as 'ow Oliver Leach is dead?"

"Yes,—Dr. Forsyth told me last night."

"Now d'ye think a man like 'im is gone to Heaven?" demanded Bainton—"Honest an' true, d'ye think the Lord Almighty wants 'im?"

John was rather non-plussed. His garrulous gardener watched his face with attentive interest.

"Don't ye answer unless ye like, Passon!" he observed, sagaciously—"I don't want to make ye say things which ain't orthodox! You keep a still tongue, an' I shall understand!"

John took the hint. He 'kept a still tongue'—and turned back from the garden into the house. Bainton chuckled softly.

"Passon can't lie!" he said to himself—"He couldn't do it to save his life! That's just the best of 'im! Now if he'd begun tellin' me that he was sure that blackhearted rascal 'ad gone to keep company with the angels I'd a nigh despised 'im!—I would reely now!"

That same morning, when John walked up to the Manor again, he entered it as a privileged person, invested with new authority. Cicely ran to meet him, and frankly put up her face to be kissed.

"A thousand and one congratulations!" she said—"I knew this would come!—I was sure of it! But the credit of the first guess is due to the Moon-calf,—Julian, you know!—he's a poet, and he made up a whole romance about you and Maryllia the first day he ever saw you with her!"

"Did he?"—and Walden smiled—"Well, he was right! I am very happy, Cicely!"

"So am I!" And the 'Goblin' clasped her hands affectionately across his arm—"You are just the very man I should have chosen for Maryllia!—the only man, in fact!—I've never met anybody else worthy of her! But oh, if she were only strong and well! Do you know that Dr. Forsyth is bringing another specialist to see her this afternoon?"

"Yes, I know!"

"And there's other news for you this morning"—pursued Cicely, a broad smile lighting up her face and eyes—"Very amusing news! Lord Roxmouth is married!"

"Married!" exclaimed Walden, incredulously—"Not possible!"

"Come and see the wedding cards!"—and Cicely, laughing outright, caught his hand, and pulled him along into the morning-room, where Maryllia, with her couch turned so that she could see the first glimpse of her lover as he entered the doorway, was eagerly awaiting his approach—"Maryllia, here's John! Prove to him at once please that Mrs. Fred's millions are lost to you for ever!"

Maryllia laughed, and blushed sweetly too, as John bent over her and kissed her with a very expressive look of tenderness, not to say proprietorship.

"It's true, John!" she said—"Lord Roxmouth has married Aunt Emily!"

John's blue eyes lighted with sudden laughter.

"Well done!" he exclaimed, gaily—"Anything for the millions, evidently! What a comfort to think he has secured them at last! And so you have become the niece instead of the wife of the future duke, my Maryllia! When and where were they married?"

"Last week, at the Embassy in Paris. Cicely wrote to Aunt Emily at New Year, telling her that though I was much better, the doctors had said I should be a cripple for life. Well, we never had any answer at all to that letter,—not a word of regret, or affection or sympathy. Then,—this morning—behold!—the Roxmouth wedding cards!"

She took a silver-bordered envelope lying on a little table close beside her, and drawing out from it the cards in question, held them up to his view. Walden glanced at them with a touch of contempt.

"Shall I wire our united heartiest congratulations?" he queried, smiling—"And add that we are engaged to be married?"

"Do!" said Maryllia, clasping his hand in her own and kissing it—"Go and send the wire off through dear old Mrs. Tapple! And then all the village will know how happy I am!"

"How happy *we* are,"—corrected John—"I think they know that already, Maryllia! But it shall be well impressed upon them!"

Later on, when he was in the village, making his usual round of visits among the sick and poor, and receiving the affectionate good wishes of many who had heard the news of his betrothal, he saw Dr. Forsyth driving up to the Manor in his gig with another man beside him, who, as he rightly guessed, was no other than the celebrated Italian specialist,

Santori. Forsyth had promised to come and tell him the result of the consultation as soon as he knew it himself, and Walden waited for him hour after hour with increasing impatience. At last he appeared,—pale, and evidently under the influence of some strongly suppressed excitement.

"Walden,"—he said, without preface or hesitation—"are you prepared to face a great crisis?"

Walden's heart almost stood still. Had anything happened to Maryllia in the short space of time which had elapsed since he saw her last?

"What do you mean?" he faltered—"I could not bear to lose her——now——"

"You must lose her in a year at the utmost, if you do not run the risk of losing her to save her now,"—said Forsyth, bluntly—"Santori has seen her—and—keep cool, John!—he says there is just one chance of restoring her to her former health and activity again, but it is a chance fraught with imminent danger to her life. He will not risk it without her full consent,—and (knowing you are her betrothed husband)—yours. It is a very serious and difficult operation,—she may live through it, and she may not."

"I will not have it!" said Walden, quickly, almost fiercely, "She shall not be touched——"

"Wait!" continued Forsyth, regarding him steadily—"In her present condition, she will die in a year. She must. There is no help for it. If Santori operates—and he is quite willing to undertake it—she may live,—and not only may she live, but she may be absolutely strong and well again,—able to walk and ride, and enjoy her life to the full. It rests with her and with you to decide,—yes or no!"

Walden was silent.

"I may as well tell you,"—went on Forsyth—"that she—Miss Vancourt herself,—is ready to risk it. Santori has gone back to London to-night,—but if we agree to place her under his hands he will come and perform the operation next week."

"Next week!" murmured Walden, faintly—"Must it be so soon?"

"The sooner the better,"—said Forsyth, quietly, yet firmly, "Come, John, face this thing out? I am thinking of the chance of her happiness as well as yours. Is it worth while to sacrifice the whole of a young life's possible activity for the sake of one year's certainty of helplessness with death at the end? Wrestle the facts out with yourself;—go and see her to-night. And after you have talked it over together, let me know."

He went out then, and left Walden alone to face this new dark cloud of anxiety and suspense that seemed to loom over a sky which he imagined had just cleared. But when he saw Maryllia that evening, her face reflected nothing but sunshine, and her eyes were radiant with hope.

"I must take this chance, John!" she said—"Do not withhold your consent! Think what it means to us both if this great surgeon is able to set me on my feet again!—and he is so kind and gentle!—he says he has every hope of success! What happiness it will be for me if I can be all in all to you, John!—a real true wife, instead of a poor helpless invalid dependent on your daily care!—oh John, let me show you how much I love you by facing this ordeal, and trying to save my life for your sake!"

He drew her into his arms, and folded her close to his heart.

"My child—my darling! If you wish it, it shall be done!" he murmured brokenly—"And may God in His great mercy be good to us both! But if you die, my Maryllia, I shall die too—so we shall still be together!"

So it was settled; and Dr. Forsyth, vacillating uneasily between hope and fear, communicated the decision at once to the famous Italian surgeon, who, without any delay or hesitation responded by promptly fixing a day in the ensuing week for his performance of the critical task which was either to kill or cure a woman who to one man was the dearest of all earth's creatures. And with such dreadful rapidity did the hours fly towards that day that Walden experienced in himself all the trembling horrors of a condemned criminal who knows

that his execution is fixed for a certain moment to which Time itself seems racing like a relentless bloodhound, sure of its quarry. Writing to Bishop Brent he told him all, and thus concluded his letter:—

"If I lose her now—now, after the joy of knowing that she loves me—I shall kneel before you broken-hearted and implore your forgiveness for ever having called you selfish in the extremity of your grief and despair for the loss of love. For I am myself utterly selfish to the heart's core, and though I say every night in my prayers 'Thy Will be done,' I know that if she is taken from me I shall rebel against that Will! For I am only human,—and make no pretence to be more than a man who loves greatly!"

During this interval of suspense Cicely and Julian were thrown much together. Every moment that Walden could spare from his parish work, he passed by the side of his beloved, knowing that his presence made her happy, and fearing that these days might be his last with her on earth. Maryllia herself however seemed to have no such forebodings. She was wonderfully bright and cheerful, and though her body was so helpless her face was radiant with such perfect happiness that it looked as fair as that of any pictured angel. Cicely, recognising the nature of the ordeal through which these two lovers were passing, left them as much by themselves as possible, and laid upon Julian the burden of her own particular terrors which she was at no pains to conceal. And unfortunately Julian did not, under the immediate circumstances, prove a very cheery comforter.

"I hate the knife!" he said, gloomily—"Everyone is cut up or slashed about in these days—there's too much of it altogether. If ever a fruit pip goes the way it should not go into my interior mechanism, I hope it may be left there to sprout up into a tree if it likes—I don't mind, so long as I'm not sliced up for appendicitis or pipcitis or whatever it is."

"I wonder what our great-grand-parents used to do when they were ill?" queried Cicely, with a melancholy stare in her big, pitiful dark eyes.

"They let blood,"—replied Julian—"They used to go to the barber's and get a vein cut at the same time as their hair. Of course it was all wrong. We all know now that it was very wrong. In another hundred years or so we shall find out that twentieth-century surgery was just as wrong."

Cicely clasped her hands nervously.

"Oh, don't you think Maryllia will come through the operation all right?" she implored, for about the hundredth time in the course of two days.

Julian looked away from her.

"I don't know—and I don't like to express any opinion about it,"—he answered, with careful gentleness—"But there *is* danger—and—if the worst should happen——"

"It won't happen! It sha'n't!" cried Cicely passionately.

"Dear little singing Goblin, I wish you could control fate!" And, taking her hand, he patted it affectionately. "Everything would be all right for everybody if you could make it so, I'm sure!—even for me! Wouldn't it?"

Cicely blushed suddenly.

"I don't know,"—she said—"I never think about you!"

He smiled.

"Don't you? Well,—perhaps some day you will! When you are a great prima donna, you will read the poems and verses I shall write about you in all the newspapers and magazines, and you will say as you take kings' and emperors' diamonds out of your hair: 'Who is this fellow?' Ah yes! I remember him! He was a chum of mine down in the little village of St. Rest. I called him Mooncalf, and he called me Goblin. And—he was very fond of me!"

She laughed a little, and drew away her hand from his.

"Don't talk nonsense!" she said—"Think of Maryllia—and of Mr. Walden!"

"I do think of them,—I think of them all the time!" declared Julian earnestly—"And that is why I am so uneasy. For—if the worst should happen, it will break Walden's heart."

Cicely's eyes filled with tears. She hurried away from him without another word or glance.

The fateful morning dawned. Walden had parted from Maryllia the previous night, promising himself that he would see her again before she passed into the surgeon's hands,—but Forsyth would not permit this.

"She does not wish it, John,"—he said—"And she has asked me to tell you so. Stay away from the Manor—keep quiet in your own house, if you feel unable to perform your usual round of work. It will be best for her and for you. I will let you know directly the operation is over. Santori is already here. Now"—and he gave Walden's hand a close and friendly grip—"steady, John! Say your prayers if you like,—we want all the help God can give us!"

The door opened and closed again—he was gone. A great silence,—a horrible oppression and loneliness fell upon Walden's heart. He sank into his accustomed chair and stared before him with unseeing eyes,—mechanically patting his dog Nebbie while gently pushing the animal back in its attempts to clamber on his knee.

"My God, my God!" he muttered—"What shall I do without her!"

Someone opened the door again just then. He started, thinking that Forsyth had returned perhaps to tell him something he had forgotten. But the tall attenuated form that confronted him was not that of Forsyth. A look of amazed recognition, almost of awe, flashed into his eyes.

"Brent!" he cried,—and he caught at the pale hands extended to him,—hands like those of a saint whose flesh is worn by fasting and prayer;—then, with something of a sob, exclaimed again—"Harry! How——why did you come?"

Brent's eyes met his with a world of sympathy and tenderness in their dark and melancholy depths.

"I have come,"—he said,—and his musical voice, grave and sweet, trembled with deep feeling—"because I think this is your dark hour, John!—and because——perhaps——you may need me!"

And John, meeting that sad and steadfast gaze, and shaken beyond control by his pent-up suffering and suspense, suddenly fell on his knees.

"Help me!" he cried, appealingly, with the tears struggling in his throat—"You are right—I need you! Help me to be strong——you are nearer God than I am! Pray for me!"

Gently the Bishop withdrew his hands from the fevered clasp that held them, and laid them tenderly on the bowed head. His lips moved, but he uttered no words. There was a solemn pause, broken only by the slow ticking of the clock in the outer hall.

Presently, rising in obedience to his friend's persuasive touch, Walden stood awhile with face turned away, trying to master himself, yet trembling in every nerve, despite his efforts.

"Brent,"—he began, huskily——"I am ashamed that you should see me like this——so weak——"

"A weakness that will make you stronger by and by, John!" and the Bishop linked a friendly arm within his own—"Come into the church with me, will you? I feel the influence of your enshrined Saint upon me! Let us wait for news, good or bad, at the altar,—and while waiting, we will pray. Do you remember what I said to you when you came to see me last summer? 'Some day, when we are in very desperate straits, we will see what your Saint can do for us'? Come!"

Without a word of demur, John obeyed. They passed out of the house together and took the private by-path to the church. It was then about noon, and the sun shone through a soft mist that threatened rain without permitting it to fall. The faint piping of a thrush in the near distance suggested the music of the coming Spring, and the delicate odour of plant-life pushing its way through the earth gave a pungent freshness to the quiet air. Arriving at the beautiful little sanctuary, they entered it by the vestry, though the public door stood open according to invariable custom. A singularly brilliant glare of luminance reflected from the plain clear glass

that filled the apertures of the rose-window above the altar, struck aslant on the old-world sarcophagus which doubtless contained the remains of one who, all 'miraculous' attributes apart, had nobly lived and bravely died,—and as the Bishop moved reverently round it to the front of the altar-rails, his eyes were uplifted and full of spiritual rapture.

"Kneel here with me, John!" he said—"And with all our hearts and all our minds, let us pray to God for the life of the beloved woman whom God has given you,—given, surely, not to take away again, but to be more completely made your own! Let us pray, as the faithful servants of Christ prayed in the early days of the Church,—not hesitatingly, not doubtingly, not fearingly!—but believing and making *sure* that our prayers will, if good for us, be granted!"

They knelt together. Walden, folding his arms on the altar-rails, hid his face,—but the Bishop, clasping his hands and fixing his eyes on the word 'Resurget' that flashed out of the worn alabaster wherein the unknown 'Saint' reposed, seemed to gather to himself all the sunlight that poured through the window above him, and to exhale from his own slight worn frame something like the mystic halo of glory pictured round the figure of an apostle or evangelist.

The minutes slowly ebbed away. The church clock chimed the half-hour after noon—and they remained absorbed in a trance of speechless, passionate prayer They were unaware that some of Walden's parishioners, moved by the same idea of praying for Maryllia while she was undergoing the operation, which was to save or slay, had come to the church also for that purpose, but were brought to a pause on the threshold of the building by the sight they saw within. That their own beloved 'Passon' should be kneeling at the altar in the agony of his own heart's Gethsemane was too much for their simple and affectionate souls,—and they withdrew in haste and silence, many of them with tears in their eyes. They were considerably awed too by the discovery that no less a personage than the Bishop of the diocese himself was companioning Walden in his trouble,—and, moving away in little

groups of twos and threes, they stood about here and there in the churchyard, waiting for they knew not what, and all affected by the same thrill of mingled suspense, hope and fear. Among them was Bainton, who, when he had peered into the white silence of the church and had seen for himself that it was indeed his master who was praying there beside his Bishop, made no pretence to hide his emotion.

"We be all fools together,"—he said to Adam Frost in hoarse accents, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand—"We ain't no stronger nor wiser than a lot o' chitterin' sparrows on a housetop! Old Josey, he be too weak an' ailin' to get out in this kind o' weather, but he sez he's prayin' 'ard, which I truly believe he is, though he ain't in church. All the village is on its knees this marnin' I reckon, whether it's workin' in fields or gardens, or barns or orchards, an' if the Lord A'mighty don't take no notice of us, He must be powerful 'ard of 'earin'!"

Adam Frost coughed warningly,—jerked his thumb in the direction of the church, and was silent.

Suddenly a lark sang. Rising from the thick moss and grass which quilted over the grave of 'th' owld Squire, Maryllia's father, the bird soared hoveringly aloft into the sun-warmed February air,—and by one common impulse the villagers looked up, watching the quivering of its wings.

"Bless us! That's the first skylark of the year!" said Mrs. Frost, who, holding her blue-eyed 'Baby Hippolyta,' otherwise Ipsie, by the hand, stood near the church porch—"Ain't it singin' sweet?"

"Fine!" murmured one or two of her gossips near her,—"Seems a good sign o' smilin' weather!"

There was a silence then among the merely human company, while the bird of heaven sang on more and more exultingly, and soared higher and higher into the misty grey-blue of the sky.

All at once the clock struck with a sharp clang 'one.' Inside the church, its deep reverberation startled the watchers from their prayers with an abrupt shock—and Walden lifted

his head from his folded arms, showing in the bright shaft of strong sunshine that now bathed him in its radiance, his sad eyes, heavy and swollen with restrained tears. Suddenly there was a murmur of voices outside,—a smothered cry,—and then a little flying figure, breathless, hatless, with wild sparkling eyes and dark hair streaming loose in the wind, rushed into the church. It was Cicely.

"It's all over!" she cried.

Walden sprang up, sick and dizzy. Bishop Brent rose from his knees slowly, his delicate right hand clutching nervously at the altar-rail. Like men in a dream, they heard and gazed, stricken by a mutual horror too paralysing for speech.

"All over!"—muttered John, feebly—"My God!—my God! All over!"

Cicely sprang to him and caught his arm.

"Yes!—Don't you understand?" and her voice shook with excitement—"All over! She is safe!—quite safe!—she will be well! Mr. Walden!—John!—don't look at me like that! oh dear!" and she turned a piteous glance on Bishop Brent who was, to her, a complete stranger——"He doesn't seem to hear me—please speak to him!—do make him understand! Everything has been done successfully—and Maryllia will live—she will be her own dear bright self again! As soon as I heard the good news, I raced down here to tell you and everybody!—oh John!—poor John!"

For, with a great sigh and a sudden stretching upward of his arms as though he sought to reach all Heaven with his soul's full measure of gratitude, John staggered blindly a few steps from the altar of the Saint's Rest and fell,—senseless.

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Again the merry month of May came in rejoicing. Again the May-pole glorious with blossoms and ribbons, made its nodding royal progress through the village of St. Rest,

escorted by well-nigh a hundred children, who, with laughter and song carried it triumphantly up to Abbot's Manor, and danced round it in a ring on the broad grassy terrace facing the open windows of Maryllia's favourite morning-room, where Maryllia herself, sweet and fair as a very queen of spring, stood watching them, with John Walden at her side. Again their fresh young voices, gay with the musical hilarity of happiness, carolled 'The Mayers' Song':—

"We have been rambling all this night,
And almost all this day;
And now returning back again,
We bring you in the May!

A branch of May we have brought you,
And at your door it stands,
'Tis but a sprout,
But 'tis budded out
By the work of our Lord's hands.

The Heavenly gates are open wide,
Our paths are beaten plain;
And if a man be not too far gone,
He may return again!"

"That's true!" said John, slipping an arm round his beloved, and whispering his words in the little delicate ear half-hidden by the clustering gold-brown curls above it—"If a man be not too far gone as a bachelor, he may perhaps 'return again' as a tolerable husband? What do you think, my Maryllia?"

Her eyes sparkled with all their own mirth and mischief.

"I couldn't possibly say—yet!" she said—"You are quite perfect as an engaged man,—I never heard of anybody quite so attentive—so—well!—so nicely behaved!" and she laughed, "But how you will turn out when you are married, I shouldn't like to prophesy!"

"If the children weren't looking at us, I should kiss you," he observed, with a suggestive glance at her smiling lips.

"I'm sure you would!" she rejoined—"For an 'old' bachelor, John, you are quite an adept at that kind of thing!"

Here the little village dancers slackened the speed of their tripping measure and moved slowly round and round, allowing the garlands and ribbons to drop from their hands one by one against the May-pole, as they sang in softer tones—

"The moon shines bright, and the stars give light,
A little before it is day,
So God bless you all, both great and small,
And send you a merrie May!"

Ceasing at this, they all gathered in one group and burst out into an ecstatic roar.

"Hurra! Three cheers for Passon!"

"Hurra! Hurra! Hurra!"

"Three cheers for Miss Vancourt!"

"Hurra!" But here there was a pause. Someone was obstructing the wave of enthusiasm. Signs of mixed scuffling were apparent,—when all suddenly the bold voice of Bob Keeley cried out:

"Not a bit of it! Three cheers for Missis Passon!"

Shouts of laughter followed this irreverent proposal, together with such whooping and cheering as never was. Ipsie Frost, who of course was present, no village revel being considered complete without her, was dancing recklessly all by herself on the grass, chirping in her baby voice a ballad of her own contriving which ran thus:

"Daisies white, violets blue,
Cowslips yellow,—and
I loves *'oo*!

Little bird's nest
Up in a tree,
Spring's comin',—and
'Oo loves *me*!"

And it was after Ipsie that Maryllia ran, to cover her smiles and blushes as the echo of the children's mirth pealed through

the garden,—and with the pretty blue-eyed little creature clinging to her hand, she came back again sedately, with all her own winsome and fairy-like stateliness to thank them for their good wishes.

"They mean it so well, John!" she said afterwards, when the youngsters, still laughing and cheering, had gone away with their crowned symbol of the dawning spring—"and they love you so much! I never knew of any man that was loved so much by so many people in one little place as you are, John! And to be loved by all the children is a great thing;—I think—of course I cannot be quite sure—but I think it is an exceptional thing—for a clergyman!"

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With rose-crowned June, the rose-window in the church of St. Rest was filled in and completed. Maryllia had found all the remaining ancient stained glass that had been needed to give the finishing touch to its beauty, and the loveliest deep gem-like hues shone through the carven apertures like rare jewels in a perfect setting. The rays of light filtering through them were wonderful and mystical,—such as might fall from the pausing wings of some great ministering angel,—and under the blaze of splendid colour, the white sarcophagus with its unknown 'Saint' asleep, lay steeped in soft folds of crimson and azure, gold and amethyst, while even the hollow notches in the sculptured word 'Resurget' seemed filled with delicate tints like those painted by old-world monks on treasured missals. And presently one morning came,—warm with the breath of summer, sunny and beautiful,—when the window was solemnly re-consecrated by Bishop Brent at ten o'clock,—a consecration followed by the loud and joyous ringing of the bells, and a further sacred ceremony,—the solemnisation of matrimony between John Walden and Maryllia Vancourt. All the village swarmed out like a hive of bees from their honey-cells to see their 'Passon' married. Hundreds of

honest and affectionate eyes looked love on the bride, as clad in the simplest of simple white gowns, with a plain white veil draping her from head to foot, she came walking to the church across the warm clover-scented fields, like any village maid, straight from the Manor, escorted only by Cicely, her one bridesmaid. At the churchyard gate, she was met by all the youngest girls of the school, arrayed in white, who, carrying rush baskets full of wild flowers, scattered them before her as she moved,—and when she arrived at the church porch, she was followed by the little child Ipsie, whose round, fair cherub-like face reflected one broad smile of delight, and who carried between her two tiny hands a basket full to overflowing of old French damask roses, red as the wine-glow of a summer sunset. The church was crowded,—not only by villagers but by county folks,—for everyone from near or far that could be present at what they judged to be a 'strange' wedding—namely a wedding for love and love alone—had mustered in force for the occasion. One or two had stayed away from a certain sense of discrepancy in themselves, to which it is needless to refer. Sir Morton Pippitt was among these. He felt,—but what he felt is quite immaterial. And so far as his daughter was concerned, she, as Bainton expressed it, had 'gone a-visitin'.' The Ittlethwaites, of Ittlethwaite Park, in all the glory of their Magnum Chartus forebears were present, as were the Mandeville-Porehams;—while to Julian Adderley was given the honour of being Walden's 'best man.' He, as the music of the wedding voluntary poured from the organ through the flower-scented air, wondered doubtfully whether poetic inspiration would ever assist him in such wise as to enable him to express in language the exquisite sweetness of Maryllia's face, as, standing beside the man whose tender and loyal love she was surer of than any other possession in this world she repeated in soft accents the vow: "to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey till death do us part!"

And when Bishop Brent placed her little hand in that of

his old college friend, and pressed them tenderly together, he felt, looking at the heavenly light that beamed from her sweet eyes, that not even death itself could part her fond soul from that of the man whom she loved, and who loved her so purely and faithfully in God's sight. Thus, when pronouncing the words—"Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder!" he was deeply conscious that for once at least in the troublous and uncertain ways of the modern world, the holy bond of wedlock was approved of in such wise as to be final and eternal.

Away in London, on this same marriage-day, Lady Roxmouth, formerly Mrs. Fred Vancourt, sat at luncheon in her sumptuously furnished house in Park Lane, and looked across the table at her husband, while he lazily sipped a glass of wine.

"That ridiculous girl Maryllia has married her parson by this time I suppose,"—she said—"Of course it's perfectly scandalous! Lady Beaulyon was quite disgusted when she heard of it—such an alliance for a Vancourt! And Mr. and Mrs. Bludlip Courtenay tell me that the man Walden is quite an objectionable person—positively boorish! It's dreadful really! But who could ever have imagined she would recover from that hunting spill? Wentworth Glynn said she was crippled for life. He told me so himself."

"Well, he was wrong evidently,"—said Roxmouth, curtly. "English surgeons are very clever, but they are not always infallible. This time an Italian has beaten them."

"Perhaps she was not so seriously injured as the local man at St. Rest made her out to be,"—pursued her ladyship, reflectively.

Roxmouth said nothing. She studied his face with amused scrutiny.

"Perhaps it was another little *ruse* to get rid of you and your wooing,"—she went on—"Dear me! What an extraordinary contempt Maryllia always had for you to be sure!"

He moved restlessly, and she smiled—a hard little smile.

"I guess you're hankering after her still!" she hinted.

"Your remarks are in rather bad taste,"—he rejoined, coldly, helping himself to another glass of wine.

She rose from her chair, and came round the table to where he sat, laying a heavily jewelled hand on his shoulder.

"Well, you've got '*me*!" she said—"And all I'm worth! And you 'love' me, don't you?"

She laughed a little.

He looked full at her,—at her worn, hard, artificially got-up face, her fashionable frock, and her cold, expressionless eyes.

"Oh yes!" he answered, drily—"I 'love' you! You know I do. We understand each other!"

"I guess we do!" she thought to herself as she left him—"And when I'm tired of being called 'My lady' or 'Your Grace' I'll divorce him! And I'll take care he isn't a penny the richer! There's always that game to play, and you bet the Smart Set know how to play it!"

But of the ways, doings or sayings of the Smart Set the village of St. Rest knows little and cares less. It dozes peacefully with the sun in its eyes, year in and year out, under the shadow of the eastern hills, with its beloved 'Passon' and now its equally beloved 'Passon's wife,' as king and queen of its tiny governmental concerns, drawing health and peace, contentment and tranquillity from the influences of nature, unspoilt by contact with the busier and wearier world. 'Passon Walden's' wedding-day was the chief great historic event of its conscious life. For on that never-to-be-forgotten and glorious occasion, the tenantry of Abbot's Manor, together with all the villagers and the school-children were entertained at an open-air festival and dance, which lasted all the afternoon and evening, on the broad smooth greensward encircling the famous 'Five Sister' beeches where bride and bridegroom had looked upon each other for the first time. What a high tide of simple revelry it was to be sure! Never had the delicate tremulous green foliage of the rescued trees waved over a happier scene. 'Many a kiss both odd and even' was exchanged among lads and lasses at that blithe

merry-making,—even Cicely and Julian Adderley were not always to be found when they were wanted, having taken to 'composing music and poetry together,' which no doubt quite accounted for their long rambles away from all the rest of the merry crowd. Mrs. Spruce, with a circle of her gossips round her, sat talking the whole livelong day on the 'ways o' the Lord bein' past findin' out.'

"For," said she, "when Miss Maryllia first come 'ome she 'adn't an idee o' goin' to hear Passon Walden, an' sez I, 'Do-ee go an' hear 'im,' an' she sez—'No, Spruce, I cannot, I don't believe in it'—an' I sez to myself, 'Never mind, the Lord 'e knows 'is own,' which He do, but 'ard as are His ways I never did think He'd a' brought her to be Passon's wife,—that do beat me, though it's just what it should be, an' if the Lord don't know what should be why then no one don't, an' that 'minds me o' when I sent for Passon to see me unpack Miss Maryllia's boxes, he was that careful he made me pick up a pair o' pink shoes what 'ad fell on the floor—'Take care o' them,' he sez—Lor!—now I come to think of it, he was mortal struck over them pink shoes!"

And Bainton commenting on general events observed:—

"Well, I did say once that if Passon were married he'd be a fine man spoilt, but I've altered my mind now! I think he's a fine man full growed at last, like a plant what's stopped a bit an' suddenly takes a start an' begins to flower. An' so far as my own line goes, if Missis Walden, bless 'er, comes round me talkin' about the rectory garden, which is to be kep' up just the same as ever, an' fusses like over the lilac bush what he broke a piece off for her, well!—I *did* say I'd never 'ave a petticut round *my* work—but a pretty petticut's worth looking at, it is reely now!"

So the harmless chatter among the village folks went on, and the feasting, dancing and singing lasted long. Chief of important personages among all that gathered under the old beech-trees was Josey Letherbarrow,—very feeble,—very dim of eye, but stout of heart and firm of opinion as ever. Beside him sat Bishop Brent,—with Walden himself and his

bride,—for from his venerable hands Maryllia had sought the first blessing on her marriage as soon as the wedding ceremony had ended.

"Everything's all right if we'll only believe it!" he said now, looking with a wistful tenderness from one to the other—"Life's all right—death's all right! I'm sartin sure I'll find everything just as I've hoped an' prayed for't when I gets to th' other side o' this world, for I've 'ad my 'art's best wish given to me when all 'ope seemed over—an' that was to see Squire's gel 'appy! An' she *is* 'appy!—look at 'er, as fresh as a little rose all smilin' an' ready to bloom on 'er husband's lovin' 'art! Ah! Th' owld Squire would a' been proud to see 'em this bright day! And as for the Lord A'mighty He knows what He's about I tell ye!" and Josey nodded his head with great sagacity—"Some folks think He don't—but He do!"

The Bishop smiled.

"Verily I have not found so great a faith—no, not in Israel!"—he murmured, as presently he rose and strolled away by himself for a while to muse and meditate. Towards sunset Walden, going in search of him, found him in the rose garden, looking at the profuse red clusters of bloom in the old French damask border.

"How they smile openly to the sun!" he said, pointing to them, as John approached—"Like love!—or faith!"

John was silent a moment. Then he said suddenly—

"Are you going over to Rome, Harry?"

"No!" And Brent's eyes looked full into those of his friend, straightly and steadfastly. "Not now. I will do the work appointed for me to the end!"

"Thank God!" said Walden, simply. And their hands met in a close grasp, thereby sealing a wordless compact, never to be broken.

The sun sank, and the moon began to rise. Song and dance gradually ceased, and the happy villagers began to disperse, and wend their ways homeward. Love was in the air—love breathed in the perfume of the flowers—love tuned

the throats of the passionate nightingales that warbled out their mating songs in every hazel copse and from every acacia bough in the Manor woods, and love seemed, as the poet says, to 'sit astride o' the moon' as its silver orb peered over the gables of the Manor itself and poured a white shower of glory on the sweet face and delicate form of Maryllia, as she stood in the old Tudor courtyard, now a veritable wilderness of flowers, with her husband's arm round her, listening to the faint far-off singing of the villagers returning to their homes through the scented green lanes.

"Everyone has been happy to-day!" she said, looking up with a smile—"All the world around us seems to thank God!"

"All the world would thank Him if it could but find what we have found!" answered John, drawing her close to his heart—"All it wants, all it needs, both for itself and others, for this world and the next, is simply—Love!"

THE END

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